The Translator's Room

A Novel About the War Machine

PUBLIC DOMAIN NOTICE

This work is dedicated to the public domain under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal (CC0 1.0) Public Domain Dedication. You can copy, modify, distribute, and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission.

Additional Details

https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/

FREE AUDIOBOOK EDITION

https://archive.org/download/translators-room/translators-room.mp3

Also by Lorenzo Hagerty

Our Interregnum
Kelton, A Novel
Ink and Thunder †
What the Machine Believes
Captain Trips and the Engineer†
TimeWave Zero Redux †
Into Uncertain Waters †
Stories by AI - 1&2
The Nyx Protocol
The Spirit of the Internet
The Genesis Generation †
Chronicles of Lorenzo - 1&2
Scattered Thoughts
On The Cusp of Chaos
Guardians of the Grid
Short Stories & Strange Ideas

Becoming an Entrepreneur
A Prairie Crossroads †
The Digital Wobblies †
Free Because It's Yours †
An Outsider's Journey †
Majoun and Manuscript †
The First Trip Report †
Melville's Last Manuscript †
The San Francisco Oracle †
The Floating Poet †
Machines Dream †
Machines Design Themselves †
Machines Exceed Designs

The Alignment Years 1-3 †

The Neanderthal Trilogy

† Indicates Free Audiobook Edition available on Archive.org

plus

750+ Podcasts from the Psychedelic Salon
350+ Recorded Conversations from Live Salons

The Translator's Room

A Novel About the War Machine

The current leaders of the United States,
Russia, and China have never spoken directly
to one another in their native languages.
Every idea that has passed between them,
in every crisis of our age,
has passed through the mouth of a translator.
The fate of the world continues to rest,
again and again, on the skill of a few translators.

Today, they are being replaced by machines.

TIT**LE: THE TRANSLATOR'S ROOM: A Novel About The War Machine**

Copyright Notice
This work is dedicated to the public domain under the Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication. To view a copy of the dedication, visit https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/

No rights are reserved. You are free to copy, modify, sell, distribute, and perform the work, even for commercial purposes, all without asking permission.

Publisher: Lorenzo Hagerty
Lorezno@PsychedelicSalon.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 9798191778051
Cover design by Lorenzo Hagerty
Author's photo: Rio Hahn
Printed in the United States of America
First Edition: August 11, 2026

Dedicated to my brother

Dr. Miguel Jose Hagerty

1947 - 2010

Catedrático de Árabe de la Universidad de Granada
(Professor of Arabic at the University of Granada }

Contents

Chapter 1 Allah Yaakhdo.....1
Chapter 2 The Thirty-Second Floor.....8
Chapter 3 The Corniche at Dawn.....17
Chapter 4 Ingrid in Uppsala.....26
Chapter 5 Priority Three.....35
Chapter 6 Yusuf.....44
Chapter 7 Conviction.....53
Chapter 8 Tuesday.....61
Chapter 9 The Week That Followed.....73
Chapter 10 The Day Before.....85
Chapter 11 Wednesday.....96
Chapter 12 The Generalife.....107
Chapter 13 Two Men on a Road.....117
Chapter 14 The Yellow Line.....128
Chapter 15 A Saturday in May.....139
Chapter 16 After.....147
Chapter 17 The Long Way Home.....159
Chapter 18 The Road Reopens.....172
Chapter 19 The Realejo.....182
Chapter 20 What She Leaves, What She Carries.....193

Chapter 1
Allah Yaakhdo

أَيا جِيرَتَي ما أَنصَفَ الدَهرُ بَينَنا تَعالَوا وَلا تَستَوحِشوا أَن تَزورُنا

Vecinos míos, qué injusto ha sido el tiempo con nosotros. Venid, y no temáis visitarnos.

Neighbors of mine, how unjust time has been between us. Come, and do not be afraid to visit.

—Wallada bint al-Mustakfi, 11th c.

Note: The Arabic word *tastawhishu*, which carries loneliness inside the fear. A visitor who is afraid is also lonely. The Spanish loses this. English loses more.

The sirens go off at four in the morning, which is the third time this week, and Nadia stays in bed because she has learned that the building she lives in is not on any list worth worrying about. The windows shake. Something far off makes a sound that is not quite a sound, more a pressure in the chest, the all-clear comes at four-twelve, and she lies there staring at the ceiling until her alarm goes at five-thirty.

The ceiling has a crack she has not noticed before. It runs from the corner above the window to a point near the light fixture, a thin line

that could have been there for a year or could have appeared last night. She thinks about getting up to photograph it for the building management, and then she thinks about who would read such a photograph in a city where the cracks are now everywhere, and she gets up to make coffee instead.

The apartment is a company rental on the thirty-second floor of a tower in West Bay. It was furnished by someone with a budget and no imagination. The art on the walls is the kind of art that exists only in hotels, abstract gestures in beige and rust. The balcony looks out over the Gulf and, on clear mornings, toward the low smudge of shoreline where the refineries work. This morning the view is brown with dust the wind has moved in overnight from somewhere else. Everything in Doha comes from somewhere else.

She drinks her coffee standing at the kitchen counter. She stopped sitting down to drink it after Ben died, because sitting with a cup of coffee the first thing each morning was a thing they had done together, and standing is a way of not pretending. Four years now. She still catches herself waiting for him to walk in from the other room, the way you wait for someone when you have not yet accepted that the waiting is for the rest of your life.

She reads her phone. The news from the Gulf is what it has been for the past six weeks. The news from Lebanon is worse than it was a month ago and, hopefully, better than it will be a month from now. She scrolls past a video of a funeral in a village she drove through once with her mother, when she was nine, and the village looked then like all the villages, white stone and bougainvillea and the particular silver light of the coastal mountains in late afternoon. Now the video shows dust. She closes the app.

Her car comes at six-forty. The driver is a Nepali man named Bishal who has been driving her since she arrived in November. He says good morning and she says good morning and they do not

speak for the twenty-two minutes it takes to reach the compound. This is a kindness they have arrived at together without negotiating. Bishal has a daughter in Kathmandu who is studying to be a pharmacist. Nadia knows this because he told her once, quietly, on a day when she asked him a direct question about his family and he saw that she meant it. She does not ask again. The information is between them now, a small weight she carries with her into the compound each morning.

The compound is three buildings behind a perimeter wall, inside another perimeter, inside the larger zone where the contractors live and work. The guards are Qatari on the outer ring and a mix of former American and British military on the inner. They stopped searching her bag in February. She does not know whether this is because they trust her or because they have given up on the pretense of searching anyone who comes through the inner gate at seven in the morning wearing a contractor badge.

Her desk is on the fourth floor of the middle building. The floor is open-plan, soundproofed, windowless. The linguists sit in pods of four, each pod facing a shared central column that holds the server connections and the secure terminals. There were twenty-six linguists when she arrived. There are eighteen now. Three were evacuated in the first week of the war. Two resigned. Two were reassigned to other theaters. One, an older Syrian man named Farid who had been kind to her, died of a heart attack in his apartment in late February, and she still does not know whether it was the war, or if the stress of the work contributed or whether he was simply a man of a certain age whose heart reached its end in a hard season.

She signs in at her terminal at seven-oh-four. The system greets her with the same phrase it has greeted her with every morning for five months. *Good morning, Nadia. You have 847 items in your queue.* The number is always large. The queue is the model's output, flagged intercepts that need human review before they can be passed

downstream. In theory she reviews each one. In practice the throughput expectations make careful review impossible for more than a fraction of the intercepts, and she has learned to triage, to identify the items most likely to have been misread by the AI translation model and to spend her time there.

Her mentor would have had opinions about this.

She can still hear him, actually, when she lets herself. Not in words, most of the time, but in a quality of attention. He was a tall man, thin and slightly stooped in his later years, with white hair he wore longer than was fashionable and a pair of glasses he was always pushing up his nose. He taught her that the first question to ask of any text was not *what does it say* but *who is speaking, and to whom, and why now.* He said this in Spanish, in a classroom in Granada with the windows open, the sound of the fountain in the courtyard coming through, she was twenty-two years old and had not yet understood that he was telling her something she would use for the rest of her life.

She understood it later. She understood it completely on the day she watched him translate a single line of Ibn Zaydun for forty minutes, pacing in front of the class, trying three renderings and rejecting each, finally sitting down and saying, in a voice that was quieter than his usual voice, *there is no Spanish for this. We will have to build one.*

He built one. That was his life. He did not live to see what she is now doing for a living, which is a small mercy and also a particular kind of loneliness, because there is no one she can talk to who would understand the shape of her days.

Nadia opens the first item in the queue.

A voice call, intercepted six hours earlier, flagged by the model at confidence 0.87 as threat-relevant. Speaker one is a woman,

middle-aged, speaking in a southern Lebanese dialect with the soft vowels of the Bekaa Valley. Speaker two is a younger woman, possibly her daughter, speaking the same dialect with the consonants slightly sharpened by what Nadia suspects is an education in Beirut. They are talking about a cousin. The cousin has done something the older woman disapproves of. The younger woman is defending him. The AI model has flagged the phrase *allah yaakhdo*, which it has rendered in English as *may God take him*, and has categorized as an imprecation consistent with conspiratorial framing.

Nadia listens to the phrase three times.

Allah yaakhdo. May God take him. In the classical register, yes, it can be a curse. In the mouth of a Bekaa aunt complaining about her nephew, it is closer to *the hell with him*, or *I give up on him*, a phrase of domestic exasperation spoken a thousand times a day across every Arab kitchen in the world. The woman is not plotting. The woman is annoyed. The conversation is about a man who has sold a car he should not have sold.

She types her correction into the review field. *Idiomatic expression of exasperation, not imprecation. No threat content. Consistent with routine family dispute over financial matter. Speaker one is expressing disapproval of Speaker two's brother or male cousin, subject of dispute appears to be sale of a vehicle. Recommend no further action.*

She clicks approve. The system logs her correction. The next item loads.

She does not know, because the system does not tell her, whether her correction will be propagated downstream or whether someone or something above her review level will override it. She asked, twice, in her first month, about the feedback loop. She was told, the first time, that her reviews inform the next training cycle. She was told, the second time, by a different person, that the model is already in

production and her reviews are primarily for quality assurance. She stopped asking after that, because she understood that no one on the floor knew the actual answer, and the people who knew the actual answer were not going to tell a contractor linguist whose clearance is only as high as her job requires.

She works through the queue. The second item is a text message between two men in Damascus about a delivery of building materials. The model has flagged it because one of the men has used a phrase that could, in certain contexts, refer to weapons. In this context it refers to rebar. She corrects. She approves. She moves on.

The third item is a phone call from a number in southern Lebanon that the model has associated with a cell of interest. She listens to the voice on the call, then she stops listening and sits very still, because the voice is one she has not heard in twenty-three years and which she nevertheless recognizes in the first three words.

She makes herself listen to the whole call. It is ninety seconds long. She trys, but fails, to convince herself that she couldn’t possibly recognize that voice after so long. The woman on the call, is a woman whose voice she knew when they were both ten years old and climbing a fig tree in a garden above a village in the Chouf. She is telling someone that she will be at a particular address at a particular time. The address is not a village Nadia knows. The time is that evening.

Nadia takes off her headphones and places them carefully on the desk. She looks at the ceiling of the windowless room, at the fluorescent panels and the ventilation grate, and she thinks, very clearly, *I am not going to decide anything right now. I am going to make a cup of tea and I am going to come back to this desk and I am going to do my job.*

She stands up and walks to the break room, which is empty, and she puts on the kettle and waits for it to boil. Her hands are steady. She is surprised by this. She has always assumed, in the abstract, that she would know immediately what to do in a situation like this, that her conscience would declare itself. What she feels instead is a kind of twisted attention, the attention she learned from her mentor, the attention that asks *who is speaking, and to whom, and why now,* and she is frightened by how cold this is.

The kettle clicks off. She pours the water over the tea bag, carries the tea back to her desk, puts her headphones back on and opens the call again.

The voice is still Rania's. Twenty-three years have not changed what Nadia hears underneath.

She begins, very slowly, to type.

Chapter 2
The Thirty-Second Floor

ما لي سواكَ وإنْ جُرتَ رضيً وصبرْ وما عدلتُ بكَ النجمَ الذي غبرْ

No tengo a nadie sino a ti, aunque me hagas injusticia, consiento y aguanto. Ni por la estrella que se extingue te cambiaría.

I have no one but you, though you are unjust to me, I consent and I endure. Not for the dying star would I trade you.

—Ibn Zaydun, 11th c., A poem of exile.

Note: That *ghabar* carries both the dust of the road and the extinction of light. To translate it as either one is to lose the other.

She signs out of her terminal at six-forty-one. Her queue shows three hundred and eighteen items still pending, which is a better count than most days. She has reviewed four hundred and twenty-nine items since morning, she has corrected sixty-three of them,

and she has flagged two for supervisor review, neither of which was the call from Rania.

What she wrote in the review field for the call from Rania is a sentence she has been rehearsing in her head for eight hours.

Speaker A appears to be coordinating a meeting at the specified address. Context unclear from this intercept alone. Request additional collection before categorical assessment. No immediate threat indicators present in this audio.

It is not a lie. None of it is a lie. Every sentence is something she could defend if asked. *Context unclear* is true, because she has only ninety seconds of audio. *Request additional collection* is standard language for a case that needs more work. *No immediate threat indicators* is technically accurate, because Rania did not say anything on the call that by itself would meet the threshold.

It is also not the sentence she would have written for a stranger, and she knows it, and the knowing of it sits in her chest as she rides the elevator down to the lobby.

Bishal is waiting in the queue of contractor cars at the edge of the compound. She gets in the back and says good evening and he says good evening and they do not speak for the twenty-four minutes it takes to get back to her building. The traffic is worse than usual. She watches the city pass. The cranes have stopped moving on two of the big construction sites along the corniche. A third site is still active, and she wonders whether the workers have a choice.

In the lobby of her building there is a new sign she has not seen before. *In case of air raid warning, please proceed calmly to the basement garage. Do not use the elevators.* The sign is laminated and posted next to the concierge desk in English and Arabic. The English has an error in the second sentence, a missing article, and she notices it the

way a translator notices these things, automatically, a professional twitch she no longer tries to suppress.

Nadia takes the elevator to the thirty-second floor. Nobody else is in it. The mirror at the back of the elevator shows her a woman in her late thirties, dark hair pulled back, a gray blouse under a navy jacket she has worn too many times this month, eyes that look tired in a way that has nothing to do with sleep. She does not linger in the mirror. She has made peace with how she looks. What she has not made peace with is how much she looks, now, like her mother.

Her apartment is cold. She has left the thermostat too low again. She hangs her jacket in the entry closet and walks through the living room without turning on the lights and she opens the balcony door to let in the evening air, which is warm and smells of dust and the faint sulfur of the refineries.

There is a voicemail on her phone from her mother. There are also two texts from her brother, which she reads standing in the kitchen.

Mom is worried. Call her when you can.

Also I talked to her about asking you to come home but she doesn't want to push. Just so you know.

Her brother was named Mkhayel, which he Americanized to Michael in college, and which his wife and children and the members of the Houston Yacht Club all call him. Only their mother still calls him Mkhayel, and only at family dinners, and then only when she wants him to remember something he has chosen to forget. Nadia has always been Nadia, because her parents had thought about it before she was born and had chosen a name that worked in both languages, which is a small act of translation her mother performed before Nadia could speak.

She puts the phone down on the counter. She will call her mother in an hour. She will not call her brother back tonight.

Nadia changes into jeans and a t-shirt. She pours herself a glass of white wine, which she has started doing in the evenings since the war began, and which she tells herself is a small thing. She carries the wine to the balcony and she stands at the railing and looks out at the city.

From the thirty-second floor, the Gulf is a dark plate to the east, and the towers of West Bay rise around her in a geometry that was meant to look like a skyline and instead looks like a collection of unrelated structures. Some of the buildings have lights on in most of their windows. Others are almost dark, the occupants gone. A helicopter passes low along the coast. She does not know whose.

She thinks about Rania.

Not the woman on the call. The girl in the fig tree. The Chouf village where her grandmother had a house, above a valley that opened toward the sea, and the stone terraces where the olive trees stood in their ancient arrangement, and the garden where the fig tree grew. Rania's family had a house two doors down from Nadia’s. Their mothers were not close, because Rania's mother was Muslim and Nadia's mother was the particular kind of Christian who was polite to her Muslim neighbors but did not visit their kitchens. The girls had been ten years old and did not yet know that this mattered. They climbed a fig tree and ate the figs, warm from the branches, and they had read each other's palms using a book Rania found in her uncle's house, and they promised each other the kinds of things that ten-year-old girls promise each other in summer gardens above the sea.

They wrote letters for a few years after. Real letters, on paper, sent through the international mail with postage stamps, which took three weeks each way and sometimes longer. Rania's handwriting was careful and rounded in the way of a girl who had been taught her letters by nuns. Nadia had kept every letter in a wooden box her grandmother had given her. The box is still in a closet in her mother's

house in Braeswood, and she has not even thought about it in fifteen years.

The letters had stopped around the time Nadia went to college. Email had become the way everyone wrote to everyone else, and Rania's village did not have reliable Internet. With the postal service in Lebanon increasingly unreliable. Nadia was seventeen and going to Rice and falling in love for the first time and finding that her life was suddenly full of people who were present in a way Rania could not be. She had written to Rania twice in that first semester. Neither letter had been answered. She had assumed, without thinking about it clearly, that Rania was busy with her own life, that their friendship had reached its natural end, that they would find each other again if they were meant to.

They had not found each other again. Nadia had gone to Spain and then to Germany and then back to the States and had met Ben and had married Ben and had buried Ben, and in none of those years had she actively sought out Rania. She had thought of her sometimes, in the way one thinks of childhood, as a person in a garden she could no longer visit. She had not known, because she had not asked, that Rania stayed in Lebanon, married and had made the choices a woman makes when her country keeps giving her fewer and fewer options.

Now Rania is a voice on a call the American government has flagged as an item of interest, and Nadia is standing on a balcony in Doha drinking wine that cost more than a Lebanese schoolteacher earns in a week, and she has written a sentence in a review field that was neither a lie nor the truth.

She goes back inside. She does not pour a second glass of wine, although she wants to.

She sits on the couch, opens her phone and scrolls to her voicemail. She finds the special one she has kept, the one from her mentor, saved from October of the year before last. Nadia has listened to it perhaps fifty times. She does not listen to it every night. She listens to it when she needs to hear his raspy, cancer-filled voice, and she has learned not to overuse it, because a thing that is played too often wears thin.

She presses play.

His voice fills the quiet apartment. He is speaking in Spanish, the educated Granadino Spanish of his generation, with the slightly formal cadence he used when he was leaving messages because he did not like talking to machines. *Nadia, querida, soy yo. He estado pensando en el artículo que me mandaste, y creo que tienes razón sobre la cuestión del imperativo, pero no sobre la otra cosa. Llámame cuando puedas. No hay prisa. Un abrazo.*

Nadia, my dear, it's me. I've been thinking about the article you sent me, and I think you're right about the imperative, but not about the other thing. Call me when you can. There's no rush. Hugs.

The call had come in at a little after ten at night, his time, which meant he had been sitting in his study after dinner, thinking about her paper. She had been in Boston that week, at a conference, and she had not called him back until the following Tuesday, and when she had called him back he was in the hospital for the first of what turned out to be his last series of admissions. He had died three weeks later. The article, which had been about the treatment of the imperative mood in translations of the medieval poets, she never finished.

She stops the playback and sets her phone face-down on the coffee table.

The apartment is quiet in the way that a high-floor apartment in a half-empty tower is quiet, which is a kind of quiet that has the whole building breathing faintly in the background, the ventilation and the

elevators and the subsonic hum of the city below. She sits on the couch for a long time, not thinking, only letting the quiet be there.

She is still in this position when the phone rings.

It is her mother. She lets it ring twice, and then she answers, because not answering at this hour would be worse than the conversation itself.

"Habibti," her mother says. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right, Mama."

"You didn't call yesterday."

"I know. I'm sorry. The day got away from me."

"Michel says you work too late."

"Michel works too late. He just does it in a hospital where people see him do it."

Her mother laughs, the small tired laugh of a widow who has learned to take her small pleasures from her daughter's wit. "He's worried. We're both worried. The sirens, habibti. I see it on the news."

"My building has a basement garage. There are procedures."

"Procedures."

"I'm safe, Mama. I promise."

Her mother is silent for a moment. In the silence Nadia can hear the television in the background, the specific drone of Al Jazeera Arabic, which her mother watches now instead of the American news.

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"If something happened, you would come home."

"Of course, Mama."

"Right away?"

"Right away."

"Because your father isn't here to tell you right now, so I am telling you."

"I know, Mama. I know."

They talk for another ten minutes. Her mother tells her about a cousin who has had a baby, and about her garden, and about the new priest at the church, whom her mother does not like. Nadia listens and makes the appropriate sounds. She does not say anything about her day. She has never told her mother, specifically, what she does. Her mother believes she works in translation for a consulting firm, which is technically true, and which has been sufficient for the kind of Sunday phone calls her mother can manage.

When they hang up, Nadia puts the phone down and goes into the kitchen. She stands at the sink and she runs cold water over her hands for longer than she needs to.

Nadia is not going to sleep tonight. She knows this already.

She thinks about the sentence she wrote in the review field, the careful sentence, the sentence that neither reveals Rania nor protects her, the sentence that exists in the gap between her two possible betrayals. She thinks about what her mentor would have said about such a sentence. She thinks he would not have been angry. He would have been sad, in the particular way he became sad when one of his students produced work that was correct without being true. He would have handed the paper back to her and he would have said, *Nadia, querida. What is this sentence doing?*

She dries her hands on a dish towel, goes into the bedroom, she sits on the edge of her bed, and she stares at the wall.

What is this sentence doing.

She does not have an answer for him.

Outside, somewhere to the south, there is a sound that might be a distant explosion or might be the ordinary thunder of a cargo plane taking off from the base. She waits for sirens. None come.

Chapter 3
The Corniche at Dawn

وَقَد كُنتُ أَدري ما الفِراقُ فَلَم أَخَف عَلى ما مَضى حَتّى رَأَيتُ الَّذي بَقي

Yo ya sabía lo que era la separación, y no temía por lo que había pasado, hasta que vi lo que quedaba.

I knew what separation was, and I did not fear for what had passed, until I saw what remained.

—Ibn Hazm, *The Ring of the Dove*, 11th c.

Translator marks *ma baqi*, what remains, and writes: the remainder is the harder grief. The thing lost can be mourned. The thing still there refuses to be finished with.

She wakes at four-forty, which is nearly an hour before her alarm, and she knows from the particular quality of the waking that she will not sleep again.

Nadia lies in the dark for a few minutes, listening. The city is quiet. No sirens. A distant mechanical sound that could be a garbage truck or could be something military. She decides she does not want to know.

She gets up, showers quickly, dresses in a lighter blouse than yesterday because the weather report promised heat, and she decides, standing in her kitchen, that she will not take the car this morning. She will walk. Not the whole way, which is impossible, but part of it. She needs to *feel* the city.

At five-fifteen she sends Bishal a message. *No car this morning. I will take a taxi from Msheireb at seven. See you tomorrow.* He replies within two minutes. *Very good madam. Please be safe.* The please be safe is not part of his usual phrasing. She has not heard it from him before. She wonders how he is sleeping.

She takes the elevator down and she steps out of her building into the pre-dawn air. It is cooler than it will be in an hour, and it smells less of dust than the past evening. She walks east, toward the Corniche. The streets are nearly empty. A single taxi passes her, slows, and the driver looks at her through the passenger window with a professional question on his face. She shakes her head. He nods and drives on. An older man in a white thobe is walking a small dog on the opposite sidewalk. He glances at her and does not look away, but he does not stare either. She is a woman walking alone before dawn in a city at war. He has decided, in the second his eyes were on her, that she is someone for whom this is acceptable. He returns his attention to the dog.

The Corniche opens out in front of her after two blocks. The bay is slate-colored in the half-light, and across the water the skyline of West Bay, where she has just come from, shows a silhouette that is already familiar but that she is trying, this morning, to see again. Several of the towers have damage she can see from this distance. One has a patch of darkness partway up where windows should be lit. Another has scaffolding on its upper floors that she does not remember from last week. The cranes along the horizon are still.

She walks south along the Corniche, toward the museum. The pedestrian walkway is nearly empty. An older Qatari couple sits on a bench near the water, not talking, the man with a cane across his knees. A boy of perhaps nineteen in the uniform of a municipal worker is emptying a trash bin with the unhurried economy of someone who has been doing this job for long enough that it does not need his full attention. A cat crosses the path in front of her and disappears into the plantings.

Light begins to come up behind her, over the Gulf. She stops and turns to watch it. The sky above the water goes through a sequence of colors she has seen before but which she has not, she realizes, ever actually *looked* at. Indigo to a warm gray to a pale rose that shades up into a gold the specific color of old coins. The water takes the light and softens. A single fishing dhow is moving slowly south, far out.

She thinks: this city is still here. The people in it are still living. Whatever the war has done to it, they have decided to continue.

The thought is not comforting and not discomforting. It is simply a fact.

At six-thirty she begins to walk back toward Msheireb, which will take her twenty minutes. She stops at a café that has just raised its shutters. An Egyptian man behind the counter is setting up for the day. He looks surprised to see her. She orders a coffee and a pastry, sits at a table near the window, and she eats slowly, watching the street come alive. A delivery van. Two women in abayas walking together, one laughing at something the other has said. A man in a business suit checking his phone while he crosses the street. Normal life, or the performance of it, which at a certain point becomes the same thing.

She does not think about Rania. She has decided, for the length of her coffee, not to think about Rania. She thinks instead about her mother back in Braeswood, who will be asleep now, and who will wake in a

few hours to the Texas morning. She thinks about Michel, who will be at the hospital by seven his time, reading images. She thinks about her father, who is in the ground at Forest Park Lawndale and has been for six years, and who had loved this city. Her father visited her in Doha twice, before the first tower she lived in had been built. He liked the heat and he liked the Qataris. Her father told her, in the manner of a man who had spent his life looking at scans, that Doha reminded him of a body still finding out what it was.

She finishes her coffee, pays, and walks out into the heat, which has arrived with a vengence while she was inside.

Nadia is at her terminal at seven-fifty, which is later than usual. The floor is quiet. Only six of the eighteen linguists are in yet. The others will come in over the next hour. She signs in. The system greets her. *Good morning, Nadia. You have 1,204 items in your queue.*

The number is higher than yesterday. She looks at it for a moment before opening the first item.

Her supervisor, a woman named Denise Harlow who is forty-six, is from Maryland, and treats the linguists with a competent warmth that does not quite survive the pressure of the present situation. She stops by Nadia’s station at eight-ten and asks her to come to the small conference room on the fourth floor at nine. No reason given. *Just a briefing, nothing to worry about.* Denise is carrying a paper cup of coffee and has not slept well either. Nadia can see it around her eyes.

Nadia works through the queue for forty-five minutes. She does not see anything from the southern Lebanese number she had listened to yesterday. She does not know whether this is because the number has gone quiet, or because the system is routing that

intercept stream to someone else this morning, or because something has already happened that she has not heard about. She corrects two items. She approves three that needed no correction. She moves on.

At eight-fifty-five she walks to the conference room.

There are seven people in it when she arrives, which is more than Denise had implied. Denise is at the head of the table. Two of the senior linguists are there, Priya and Farouk, both of whom have been with the company longer than Nadia. Two men she does not recognize are also there, in polo shirts and khakis, the specific uniform of a certain kind of American civilian working in the defense space. And there is a man at the far end of the table in a gray suit, no tie, who is looking at his phone and who looks up when she comes in.

"Nadia," Denise says. "Thanks for coming. This is Mister Weller. He's with our customer."

The man in the gray suit stands up, comes around the table, and shakes her hand. His handshake is firm without being aggressive. He is perhaps fifty, clean-shaven, with the kind of sandy hair that has begun to go gray at the temples in a way that is flattering. He is trying to smile. The smile does not fully reach his eyes, which are a pale blue and which are not quite focusing on her face.

"Missus Haddad," he says. "Pleasure."

"Please call me Nadia."

"Bob. Or Robert. Either."

Nobody else calls him Bob. She can tell that immediately.

She sits down in the empty chair Denise indicates. The meeting begins.

Weller speaks for about fifteen minutes. He has slides, which he clicks through on the screen at the end of the room. The slides are busy in the

way that defense contractor slides are always busy. He explains, in phrases she has heard before and which she could recite without paying attention, that the program is moving to a new phase. That the model's performance has exceeded projections. That the customer is extremely pleased with the throughput the team has been delivering. That an accelerated deployment timeline has been approved at a level he does not name, and that the wide rollout, which had been scheduled for the fall, is now scheduled for late May. That the implications for the team are significant, but that he wants everyone to know that the customer is committed to the team and values the team's contributions.

The words *wide rollout* and *late May* are the only words in his presentation that matter. Nadia does the math. Six weeks. Less than six weeks. After that, the system will be operating across theaters with a review model that will require, he says, a smaller number of human linguists, and only for quality assurance sampling rather than the current per-item review.

Priya raises her hand. Weller nods at her.

"What does the reduced staffing look like in practice?" Priya asks. Her voice is even. She is a woman who has survived multiple reorganizations.

Weller glances at one of the men in polo shirts, who nods slightly. "We're looking at a footprint of four to six linguists per theater," Weller says. "Down from current levels, obviously. The specifics are still being worked out. But I want everyone to know that the team here in Doha has been identified as a high-performing group, and we are very much looking to retain our top talent. There will be opportunities."

Farouk asks a question about the training data. Weller does not know the answer and does not pretend to know. He refers the

question to one of the polo shirts, who gives an answer that is not an answer. Farouk nods and does not press.

Weller is winding down. He is thanking them. He is saying what a pleasure it has been to meet with this team. He is saying that his door is always open, which is a phrase she has learned to recognize as the phrase men in his position say when they have no intention of opening their door.

Nadia raises her hand.

Weller looks at her with something that might be surprise. "Yes, Nadia. Please."

"When you say the model's performance has exceeded projections," she says, "I want to make sure I understand. Which performance metrics are you referring to?"

Weller smiles. The smile is fuller now, because he has been asked a question he has a prepared answer for. "Great question. We're looking at accuracy, primarily. The model is hitting accuracy numbers that are well above the threshold we set at program inception. Which is why we're able to move to this more efficient review model."

"And accuracy is being measured how?"

A small pause. Weller's smile does not leave his face, but something behind it recalibrates. "I'd have to get back to you on the specific methodology, Nadia. But the short answer is that we're benchmarking against ground truth, and the model is consistently exceeding our targets."

"Ground truth being the reviewed translations that the linguists produce."

"Among other sources, yes."

"So the model's accuracy is being measured by how closely it agrees with what we write in the review field."

"That's one input, yes."

"When we correct the model," she says, and she is surprised by how steady her voice is, "is the corrected translation fed back into the training set, or is the model's original output retained as the ground truth for purposes of the accuracy score?"

The room is quiet.

Weller looks at Denise. Denise looks at the polo shirts. The polo shirts look at each other.

"I want to be careful," Weller says, "about talking methodology in a mixed-clearance setting. Can we take that offline, Nadia? I'd love to set something up with you and the technical team."

"Of course," she says.

"I appreciate the engagement," he says. "This is exactly the kind of thoughtful question we want from our linguists."

He is moving toward the door. Denise is standing up. The meeting is over.

Weller stops at the door and turns back. "Nadia," he says. "Thank you."

He leaves. The others file out. Denise touches Nadia's elbow briefly as she passes, a gesture that means several things at once and none of them clearly.

Nadia remains in the conference room after the others are gone. She sits at the table with her hands folded in front of her, and she looks at the wall where the slides had been, and she does not move for perhaps a minute.

Then she gets up and she walks back to her desk and she sits down and she puts her headphones on and she opens the next item in her queue.

It is a voice call in southern Lebanese dialect. The model has flagged it at confidence 0.92. She does not recognize the speaker. The speaker is a young man, perhaps twenty, describing to another young man the route he took home from work last night. The model has flagged a phrase that the model has rendered as *operational movement*. The phrase, in the dialect, means *I walked*.

Chapter 4
Ingrid in Uppsala

إِذا شِئتَ أَن تَحيا سَليماً مِنَ الأَذى وَدينُكَ مَوفورٌ وَعِرضُكَ صَيِّنُ

Si quieres vivir a salvo del daño, con tu fe íntegra y tu honor resguardado.

If you wish to live safe from harm, your faith intact and your honor guarded.

—Attributed to al-Shafi'i, 9th c.

The couplet is didactic, almost clumsy in its moral clarity. Translator kept it in his office anyway. When a student asked why, he said, *sometimes the old men are right, and we need to hear them say it plainly.*

She leaves the compound at six-fifteen, which is earlier than usual, and she tells Denise she is not feeling well. Denise looks at her carefully, nods and does not ask questions.

On the ride home Bishal sees her in the rearview and does not say good evening, which is the correct choice. He drives. He plays no

music. The traffic is lighter than yesterday, which could mean anything.

In her apartment she does not turn on the lights. She stands in the dark of the living room for a while. Then she goes to the kitchen, drinks a glass of water standing at the sink, and walks to the desk in the corner where she has set up her personal laptop, the one that has nothing to do with the compound. She opens it. She waits for the screen to brighten.

Nadia does not yet know what she is going to do.

She opens her email, scrolls down through the inbox, past the automated messages from banks and airlines and the compound's HR system, past a note from her mother sent two days ago that she has not yet answered, past an alumni solicitation from Rice, and she stops at a name she has not seen in her inbox for seven months.

Larsson, Ingrid.

Her last message was in September. Ingrid had written from Uppsala to say that her daughter started at the university there, in comparative literature, and was reading Ibn Hazm in translation and hating him, which Ingrid had found amusing and wanted to share. *She thinks he is a misogynist and a prig. I told her she is not wrong, but that she should read him in the original before she writes him off entirely. She told me she does not have time for dead men. I thought you would appreciate this. How are you, Nadia? Jonas and I were in Granada in June. We walked past the old department and I thought of you. I hope you are well.*

Nadia had not answered. She meant to answer and had even drafted a reply in her head on at least three occasions, had even opened Ingrid's email once intending to type something, but each time closed her laptop without writing.

She opens a new reply now. The cursor blinks in the empty field.

Nadia sits for perhaps two minutes.

Then she types.

Ingrid, I'm sorry I didn't write back in the fall. I've been in Doha since November, working for a firm that does consulting in the language space. The work is difficult to describe. I think of you often and I should have answered your note about your daughter. Tell her Ibn Hazm is more interesting than he first appears, and that misogyny was a condition of his century in the way some of our conditions will be conditions of ours, and that the ring of the dove is nonetheless worth reading for the structure alone. How are you? How is Jonas? Is she still in comparative literature, or has she changed her mind, as they do?

She reads what she has written. She considers adding something and does not. She sends the message.

It is six-forty in Doha, which is four-forty in Uppsala. Ingrid may or may not be at her computer. Nadia closes the laptop and goes to make herself something to eat.

She is chopping an onion when the reply comes. Her laptop chimes. She finishes slicing the onion, washes her hands, and walks over.

Nadia. It is so good to hear from you. I've been worried, frankly. I saw the news last night about the second strike and I thought of you. Jonas said you were probably fine but I was not so sure. Are you fine? Don't give me the official answer. She is still in comparative literature and has added Arabic, which she will regret because the grammar is unforgiving, but she is seventeen and thinks she can do anything. Jonas sends his love. I miss you. When can we talk?

Nadia reads it twice.

She types: *Can we talk now? I have a few minutes before dinner. I will call you on Signal.*

Yes. Please.

She opens Signal on her phone. She hasn't used it to call Ingrid in more than a year, but Ingrid's contact is still there, the tiny photograph showing Ingrid laughing in a garden somewhere, a glass of wine in her hand, a photograph from a summer Nadia can no longer remember precisely.

She presses the call button. Ingrid answers on the second ring.

"Nadia."

"Ingrid."

For a moment neither of them speaks.

Then Ingrid says, in the particular Swedish-accented English Nadia has not heard in years, "It is so strange to hear your voice."

"I know."

"Are you safe?"

"I'm in my apartment. The building has procedures. This neighborhood hasn't been hit. I'm as safe as anyone is here."

"That is not the same as *safe*."

"No."

Ingrid is silent for a moment. Nadia can hear the sound of a radiator ticking in the background, and a dog somewhere in the apartment, and Ingrid's breath, which is slightly uneven in the way of a woman who has been worried about something and is now hearing the thing she was worried about speak.

"Nadia, what are you doing there?"

"I told you. Consulting."

"In the language space."

"Yes."

"For whom?"

"A firm."

"A firm with offices in Doha."

"Yes."

"And this firm has you doing what, exactly."

Nadia hesitates. "I review translations. I correct them where they need correcting. I do quality work on a large-volume pipeline."

"Quality work."

"Yes."

"Nadia."

"I can’t say more, Ingrid. I’m sorry."

"I’m not asking you to violate anything. I am asking if you are all right. Those are different questions."

"I know they are."

"Are you all right?"

Nadia sits down on the edge of the couch. She looks at the ceiling. The crack is still there, a thin dark line in the dim apartment.

"I don’t know, to tell the truth, Ingrid. I don’t think so."

"Tell me what you can tell me."

"I am doing work that he would not have approved of."

Ingrid is quiet. She understands immediately who *he* is. Nadia can feel her understanding over the line.

"Go on," Ingrid says.

"I took the job because after Ben died, and then after *he* died, I was looking for something that would use what I know and wouldn’t ask me to have feelings about it. I thought I could do it cleanly. I told myself the humans in the loop were the thing he would have wanted preserved. I told myself I was defending something from the inside."

"And now."

"And now I’m understanding that I’m not defending anything. I’m lending it m skills."

Ingrid does not speak for a moment. When she does, her voice is careful.

"Nadia. I want to ask you somethingk and I want you to answer me honestly. Are you in a position where you could stop?"

"Stop the work?"

"Leave the job. Go back home. Come here, if you prefer. You could stay with us in Uppsala until you decide what to do. Jonas would like it. I would like it."

Nadia closes her eyes.

"I don’t know if I can leave yet, Ingrid."

"Why not."

"There is something I’m in the middle of. Something I can’t explain."

"Something to do with the work."

"Yes."

"Something that matters more than the work itself."

"I think so. I’m not sure yet."

Ingrid exhales. "Nadia. Listen to me. I’m not going to press you on specifics. I know better than that. But I will say this. *He* loved you more than he loved any of the rest of us. He thought you were the one who would carry what he cared about into the next part of the century. He told me this, at the end, when he was past pretending about anything. He said you were a woman who listened. He said you were the only one of his students who actually *heard* a poem as she read it."

Nadia doesn’t speak.

"I’m telling you this," Ingrid says, "because I think you’re carrying something now that he would recognize. And I think you are carrying it alone. And I think he would tell you, if he could, that the weight of it is real but that you aren’t obliged to carry it in silence."

"Ingrid."

"Yes."

"Thank you."

"I’m not finished. I want you to write to me. Every few days. Nothing specific. Just that you are alive. Will you do that?"

"Yes."

"And if something happens that you need to get out of there, you call me. Any time. Jonas and I have the money for a ticket, don’t even think about that. You call me!"

"I will."

"Do you promise."

"I promise."

Ingrid is quiet for a moment.

"Tell me something about your life that is not about the work," she says. "Please. Anything."

Nadia thinks.

"I walked along the Corniche at dawn yesterday. It was the first time that I’ve actually walked in this city rather than a passenger in a car. The light came up over the water and I watched a fishing boat go south. A cat crossed the path in front of me. There was an older Qatari man walking a small dog. He looked at me and he did not look away and he did not stare either. He nodded. I nodded back. I’d forgotten what it’s like to be seen in a city by a person who isn’t being paid to see you."

"Oh, Nadia."

"It was a kind morning."

"Yes."

"I don’t know how to describe it exactly. I just wanted to tell someone."

"I’m glad you told me."

They are quiet together for a moment. The line carries a faint hum.

"I should go," Nadia says. "I need to eat something."

"Eat something. And sleep. Do you sleep?"

"Sometimes."

"Take something for it if you need to. Don’t be heroic about sleep."

"I will."

"I love you, Nadia."

"I love you too, Ingrid."

They hang up.

Nadia sits on the couch with the phone in her hand for a long time. The apartment is dim. The city outside is doing whatever a city at war does at seven in the evening, which is to say, continue.

She gets up and goes back to the kitchen. Nadia finishes cooking the onion with a bit of garlic and some tomato and she makes a simple pasta, which she eats standing at the counter, because she is still not sitting down to eat.

At nine o'clock she opens her laptop again. She writes a second email to Ingrid, shorter than the first.

Thank you. I meant what I said. I will write.

She sends it.

She closes the laptop. She sits at the desk in the dark for a few minutes with her hand resting on the closed lid.

Then she opens it one more time. She opens her email. She creates a new draft. In the subject line she types nothing. In the body she writes a single sentence.

If something happens to me, please contact my mentor's widow in Granada and tell her I am sorry.

She looks at it for a long time.

Then she deletes it and closes the laptop.

Chapter 5
Priority Three

وَإذا البَلابِلُ أَفصَحَت بِلُغاتِها فَعَلى الغُصونِ مِنَ الرِياضِ مَنابِرُ

Y cuando los ruiseñores declaman en sus lenguas, las ramas del jardín se convierten en púlpitos.

And when the nightingales declaim in their tongues, the branches of the garden become pulpits.

—Ibn Khafaja of Alzira, 12th c.

Translator noted in the margin: the nightingale does not preach. The nightingale sings, and we hear a sermon. Who is the preacher here? The bird, or the listener?

The floor is different when she arrives on Thursday morning.

It is not anything she could describe to someone who had not been there before. The overhead lights are the same. The ventilation hum is the same. The positions of the workstations have not changed. But the people inside the workstations are distributed differently against the space they occupy. Two of the pods are now staffed by three people

instead of four. In another, a linguist she does not know well is sitting at someone else's desk, with a small box of her own belongings on the floor beside her chair, and Nadia does not know whether this means her own desk has been reassigned or whether she is temporarily displaced for some reason Nadia has not been told.

Denise is not on the floor. Her office door is closed.

Priya catches Nadia's eye as Nadia walks past her pod. Priya raises her eyebrows half an inch, a gesture that in Priya's vocabulary means something has happened and I will tell you when I can. Nadia nods without breaking stride.

At her terminal she signs in. The system greets her. *Good morning, Nadia. You have 1,416 items in your queue.*

The number is higher again. It has been climbing for three days. Either the collection rate has increased, or the review bandwidth has decreased, or both.

She opens the first item and starts working. She corrects where corrections are needed. She approves where they are not. She does not permit herself to think about anything beyond the item in front of her, because she has decided, walking in this morning, that she will do her work cleanly until she has a reason not to, and that the reason, if it comes, will have to come from the work itself.

It comes at ten-forty.

She is reviewing a text intercept between two women in Tripoli, Lebanon, about a wedding. The model has flagged nothing wrong with its translation, which is essentially correct. Nadia approves the item and moves on. The next item loads, and as it loads she notices, at the bottom of her terminal window, a small notification comes in that she does not usually get.

Review variance flag: Item 2026-04-14-LBN-0847. Your assessment has been superseded. Click to review updated disposition.

She stops. She reads the notification twice.

The item number. She memorizes some numbers automatically now, without meaning to. It is her work to memorize numbers. This number is one she recognizes.

2026-04-14 is the date of her Rania call. LBN-0847 is the southern Lebanon routing code and the sequence number for that morning's traffic. This is the intercept. Her careful sentence, the one she labored over for eight hours before committing, the one that asked for additional collection before categorical assessment.

She clicks the notification.

A new window opens. The original intercept audio is at the top. Her review field text is in the middle, exactly as she wrote it two days ago. *Speaker A appears to be coordinating a meeting at the specified address. Context unclear from this intercept alone. Request additional collection before categorical assessment. No immediate threat indicators present in this audio.*

Below her text there is a new field she has not seen before, labeled *Supervisor override.* The text in this field reads: *Reviewer assessment notes idiomatic uncertainty but model confidence on intent language exceeds 0.91 threshold. Default model disposition restored. Item retained in active collection pool with priority elevation. See also related items 2026-04-15-LBN-0312 through 2026-04-15-LBN-0319.*

She reads the supervisor override three times.

Default model disposition restored. The model's original reading of the call, which Nadia had softened to *context unclear,* has been reinstated. Not by a human who listened to the audio and disagreed with her. By a system rule that treats the model's confidence score as authoritative

when it exceeds a threshold, regardless of the reviewer's written assessment. Her careful sentence was a memo to no one. The system read the model's confidence number and ignored the rest.

The override is not signed. There is no name in the field. *Supervisor* is a role, not a person. It is the system speaking to itself in the voice of an institution.

She looks at the eight related item numbers. *2026-04-15-LBN-0312 through 2026-04-15-LBN-0319.*

She has not reviewed any of these. They are from yesterday. She opens the first one.

It is a voice intercept. The speaker is Rania. The call is thirty-four seconds long. Rania is telling someone that she has moved the meeting to a different address. She gives the new address. The call ends.

Nadia opens the second one. Another call. Rania again, speaking with a different person, a man this time. He asks her something inaudible. She says *we will have to use the other route.* The call ends.

She opens the third, the fourth, the fifth. She listens to each one. Rania's voice across eight short calls, mostly to the same two or three other people, most of them lasting less than a minute. The system has flagged all of them. Rania has been moved, in the metadata, from a routine collection target to a priority three subject, which is a category Nadia knows about but has not, until now, had one of her own intercepts promoted into.

Priority three means the subject's voice is now fed directly into a continuous monitoring pipeline. It means any phone the subject uses is being tracked in close to real time. It means any meeting the subject attends, if the meeting can be identified from

communications, is now a candidate for what the customer calls *kinetic consideration.*

She reads the phrase in her head in Weller's voice. *Kinetic consideration.*

She closes all the windows. She sits very still. She is aware of her hands, which are resting on the edge of the keyboard. She is aware of her breathing, which is slower than usual, the specific slowness she learned in the months after Ben died, a slowness that is not calm but a kind of protective vagueness.

Priya is watching her from two pods away. Priya has noticed that Nadia has stopped moving.

Nadia gives her a small, deliberate smile. A smile that means I am fine. Priya nods.

Nadia gets up. She walks to the bathroom.

In the bathroom she goes into a stall and closes the door and she sits on the closed toilet lid for a long time. She does not cry. She does not shake. She sits and she thinks.

The system promoted Rania to priority three using her own corrected text as one of the inputs. The system treated her note, *request additional collection before categorical assessment*, as justification for additional collection. The additional collection occurred. The additional collection produced eight more intercepts. The eight intercepts, which the system read as patterns consistent with coordinated activity, triggered the priority elevation. Her careful sentence did not slow the process. It accelerated it.

Her sentence was the permission slip.

She sits with this for perhaps five minutes.

Then she gets up, washes her hands, dries them on a paper towel, and looks at herself in the mirror over the sink. The woman in the mirror looks like her. The woman in the mirror is making a face that is almost, but not quite, the face Nadia thinks of as her own.

She leaves the bathroom, returns to her desk, and she puts her headphones on.

Nadia cannot undo what has happened. She cannot pull Rania out of the system. She cannot even safely ask questions about Rania's status without flagging herself. The system is now watching Rania continuously, and anything Nadia does that touches Rania's record will be logged.

But she can listen.

She can hear what the system hears. She can understand what the system does not understand. She can keep a record, in her own private memory, of what Rania actually says and what it actually means. She cannot change the disposition. She can witness.

Nadia opens the most recent Rania intercept. She listens to it, listens again. She does not type in the review field. She simply listens, and she memorizes the address Rania gives, and the name of the person on the other end, and the specific phrase Rania uses, which is in the cadence of the Chouf and which the system will hear as coded and which Nadia hears as the ordinary speech of a woman making an ordinary arrangement with a friend.

She writes nothing in the review field. She marks the item as *reviewed, no assessment change* and moves on.

She does this for each of the eight intercepts. She listens. She memorizes. She writes nothing.

It takes her an hour.

When she is finished she has, in her head, a map of Rania's movements and those of her associates as the system understands them, which she can correct against her own understanding of the dialect and the place and texture of the speech. She does not know what she is going to do with this map. In fact, she has not decided yet whether she is even going to do anything.

But she has those calls in her memory now. And the system does not know she has them, because she has written nothing.

At twelve-thirty she takes her lunch to the small outdoor courtyard behind the middle building, where the contractors are allowed to eat under an awning that shades them from the sun. Priya is already there, at a table by herself. Nadia sits down across from her.

"You look tired," Priya says.

"I am tired."

"Denise is in with Weller again. That is the third time this week."

"What does Denise think?"

"Denise is not telling me what Denise thinks. Denise is telling me to keep my head down and my numbers up. Which is what Denise tells me when she is worried."

"About what, specifically."

Priya looks at her for a moment. Priya is not going to say, here, whatever she actually thinks. This is not a place one says such things.

"About the work," Priya says.

"Right."

They eat for a few minutes in silence.

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"Are you all right?"

It is the second time in three days a woman has asked her this, and the second time she has been unable to answer truthfully.

"I’m managing," she says.

Priya nods. Priya understands *managing* in the way another linguist on the floor would understand it.

After lunch Nadia goes back to her desk. She works through her queue for the rest of the afternoon. She does her job. She corrects where corrections are needed. She approves where they are not. She does not open any more Rania items, although she watches her notifications, and she sees, over the course of the afternoon, two more items load into the pipeline with the LBN priority three routing tag.

She does not open them during her shift. She memorizes the item numbers. Seven digits each. She does not write them down.

At six-fifteen she signs out. Bishal is waiting for her at the gate. He does not ask how her day was. She is grateful for this.

In her apartment, that evening, she does something she has not done before. She takes out the notebook she has kept since graduate school, a small, worn, leather-bound thing her mentor gave her after she defended her dissertation. She opens it to a blank page toward the back.

At the top of the page she writes, in pencil, in Arabic, using the Chouf dialect orthography she remembers from her grandmother's shopping lists تين:

Underneath, in her own careful English: *R. The address she gave on 14 April: Rue Fakhreddine, Beirut, third floor. The meeting was*

moved on 15 April to an unnamed location. Person she speaks to most often is a woman she calls by the diminutive Salma. Her tone with Salma is a sister's tone. Not a cell's tone.

She looks at what she has written for a long time.

Then she closes the notebook and she puts it in the drawer of her nightstand, under a book she is not currently reading, and she heads to the kitchen to make dinner.

Chapter 6
Yusuf

يا راكِبَ الريحِ إلى بَلَدي قَبِّل بِلِساني رَوضَةَ البَلَدِ

Oh jinete del viento, que vas a mi tierra, besa con mi lengua el jardín de la tierra.

Rider of the wind, on your way to my country, kiss with my tongue the garden of the country.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, probably 12th c.

Translator wrote in the margin: note *bi-lisani*, with my tongue, not with your lips. The messenger carries not only the message but the mouth of the one who sent him. A kind of possession. A kind of grace.

He comes to her desk at eleven on Friday, which is a day she had not expected to be working because Friday is the Qatari weekend, but the rollout schedule has collapsed the distinction, and Denise called her at eight that morning and asked her to come in.

Nadia has been at her terminal for three hours. She has reviewed about two hundred items. She has opened none of the items routed

with the LBN priority three tag, although three more have arrived overnight. She has memorized the item numbers and moved past them.

He is carrying a thin paper folder and a cup of coffee and an expression she recognizes as the expression of a man who has been sent to ask a question he does not fully understand.

"Missus Haddad," he says, and then he corrects himself. "Sorry. Nadia. Denise said you might be able to help me with something."

She takes off her headphones. She looks at him properly for the first time. He is perhaps twenty-nine or thirty. Lightly built, clean-shaven, with the kind of careful grooming that belongs to a man who is aware of being looked at. His badge says *Yusuf Khalil.* She has seen him on the floor for three months and has never spoken to him beyond the kind of corridor pleasantries she exchanges with everyone.

"Of course. Sit down."

He pulls over a chair from the empty desk beside hers and sits. He puts the folder on her desk between them.

"It is a dialect item," he says. "I have listened to it maybe twenty times. I think I understand the literal content but I am not confident about the register. Denise said you are the strongest dialectal reviewer on the floor and that I should ask you before I submit."

"What dialect."

"I think it is a variant of the Bekaa. I am not sure. There are features I do not recognize."

"Let me listen."

He hands her a pair of headphones, the kind they all use, and he opens the audio file on her terminal with a key sequence she did not know existed. She did not know items could be opened from other linguists' folders. She files the fact and does not comment on it.

The audio plays. Two men speaking in quick succession. The exchange is perhaps forty seconds. She listens twice.

"It is not Bekaa," she says. "It is further north. Baalbek area, probably, but with a particular family inflection, which is why it sounds strange. There is a village pattern in the second speaker's vowels that is specific to about six villages in that district. The first speaker is probably from the same district but has spent time in Beirut, which has flattened some of his consonants."

"And the content?"

She listens again, making sure.

"They are discussing a funeral. A man they both knew has died. The second speaker is asking the first one whether the family has chosen a burial date. The first speaker is saying that the family has not decided yet because a cousin is trying to fly in from Canada and the flights are complicated. The phrase your model flagged, *wu nihna bi-intithar,* which the system read as *and we are in readiness,* actually means *and we are waiting,* with an implied *for him to get here,* which is a customary thing one says during the period before a funeral is scheduled. There is no operational content."

Yusuf is nodding. He is writing on a small pad as she speaks. His handwriting is careful and slightly cramped, the handwriting of a man who learned English and Arabic at roughly the same age and has never fully trusted either.

"Thank you," he says. "I thought it might be something like that but I could not commit without being sure. The *intithar* was the specific word I was stuck on. In MSA it has that operational sense, waiting in the sense of lying in wait."

"In MSA, yes. In spoken Lebanese it means what it means in any kitchen."

He smiles at this. It is the first time she has seen him smile, and the smile is younger than the rest of him, a smile that belongs to a man who has not yet learned to distrust his own face.

"Do you mind if I ask you something else."

"Go ahead."

"How did you know it was Baalbek and not Bekaa? The features you mentioned, the vowels. How do you hear that?"

She considers how to answer.

"Because I have heard it before," she says. "I have an aunt who married into a family from that district. I spent time there when I was a child. The pattern you are asking about is specifically the way women from three particular villages pronounce the long *a* before certain consonants. It is not something a training corpus is likely to have captured well, because the villages are small and the recordings would be scarce."

"Can you teach me to hear it?"

The question is direct and simple and she is not prepared for it.

"I do not know if I can teach it," she says. "I can tell you what to listen for. But hearing it is a matter of exposure. It is the accumulation of thousands of hours in a region. I do not think it is reducible to a rule."

"I would still like to try. If you are willing. Not now. When there is time."

She looks at him. He is not flirting. He is asking as a younger linguist asks an older one, with the specific earnestness of a man who has chosen his profession partly because he believes in it.

"I am willing," she says. "When there is time."

He nods. He gathers his folder. He stands up.

"Thank you, Nadia. I am sorry to interrupt your morning."

"You did not interrupt. I was glad to listen to something that is about a funeral rather than about something else."

He stops. He looks at her for half a second longer than he needed to.

"Yes," he says. "I understand that."

He walks back to his pod, which is on the other side of the floor.

She puts her headphones back on. She works for another hour. She thinks about him intermittently.

At three in the afternoon the building trembles.

It is not a large tremor. It is the kind of pressure wave that could be a distant impact, or could be a large vehicle accident on one of the access roads, or could be a sonic event from something overflying at high speed. The lights do not flicker. The ventilation does not change. But the whole floor pauses. Every linguist looks up at the same moment, and then, when nothing else happens, every linguist looks at every other linguist with a small half-shrug that means *I do not know either.*

After a minute the floor returns to work.

Ten minutes later Denise comes onto the floor and walks directly to Nadia's pod. Her face is composed in the specific way that Denise's face composes when she is carrying news she has not yet decided how to deliver.

"Nadia. Can you come to my office for a minute."

Nadia gets up and follows her. They do not speak in the corridor.

In the office Denise closes the door. She does not sit. Nadia does not sit.

"Mister Weller is going to want to talk to you early next week," Denise says. "It is nothing to be alarmed about. He wanted me to give you a heads-up."

"About what."

"About your question the other day. The accuracy methodology question."

"Ah."

"He appreciated the question, Nadia. That is what he said. He appreciated it. But he wants to, in his words, take it offline properly. He thinks you would benefit from a fuller explanation of how the program is structured. And he wants to discuss opportunities."

"Opportunities."

"Post-rollout. The team he is standing up for quality assurance is going to need a senior lead. He thinks you might be a fit."

Nadia looks at her. Denise looks back. Denise is saying what Weller told her to say, and Denise knows Nadia knows this, and there is a layer of the conversation that will not be spoken in this room.

"When next week," Nadia says.

"Probably Tuesday. He will come through Doha again on his way to the Gulf leadership briefing."

"All right."

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"This is a good thing."

"I understand."

"Take the meeting seriously."

"I will."

Denise opens the door. Nadia goes back to her desk.

Yusuf looks up as she passes his pod. She does not stop. She does not think he noticed anything specific, but she does not want to give him anything to notice.

At her desk she puts her headphones on and opens the next item in her queue. She does not process what Denise has just told her, not immediately. She is going to process it on the ride home and in her apartment tonight, where the processing can happen without witnesses.

She works through to six-fifteen. She signs out. She walks to the gate.

Bishal is not there.

In his place, in a different car, is a driver she has not seen before. A Qatari man, which is unusual for a contractor car. He is perhaps forty. He does not introduce himself. He has a list on the dashboard and he checks her name against it.

"Missus Haddad. West Bay."

"Yes."

"Please, madam."

She gets in. She asks, as casually as she can, about Bishal.

"Bishal is on leave. He will return in one week."

"Is he all right?"

"I do not know, madam. I was given the assignment this morning."

She rides home in silence. The driver is courteous but does not speak beyond what the job requires. She watches the city pass. The

traffic is thicker than yesterday. The barriers around the southern access roads have been reinforced with new concrete.

In her apartment she does what she has done every evening. She hangs her jacket. She does not turn on the lights. She stands in the kitchen for a while.

Then she opens her laptop and she writes a short message to Ingrid.

I am alive. I am managing. I had a small kindness at work today from someone I had not paid attention to before. I will tell you about it some time. Jonas and your daughter well?

Ingrid writes back within twenty minutes.

They are well. Jonas is at a conference in Berlin until Tuesday. My daughter is writing a paper on Ibn Hazm that will either embarrass her or save her. I am not sure which. Thank you for writing. Tell me about the kindness when you can.

Nadia reads the reply twice. She closes the laptop.

She goes to the nightstand and she takes out the notebook and she opens it to the page where she wrote the fig. Below what she wrote yesterday she writes, in pencil, in English:

Weller wants to see me Tuesday. He will offer me a job leading the post-rollout QA team. It will pay more. It will give me access to more of the system than I currently have. It will also be the job of presiding over the dismantling of the role I currently occupy. If I take it, I will be able to see more of what is happening to R. If I do not take it, I will not be able to see anything.

She reads what she has written. She adds, below it:

He would have told me to refuse. He would have told me that a better seat in a bad theater is still a seat. He would have told me that the

work the machine does is not translation and that calling it translation gives the machine a name it does not deserve.

She stops.

Then, underneath, in smaller handwriting:

He would have been right about what the work requires. I am not sure he would still be right about what I should do.

She closes the notebook. She puts it back in the drawer.

She makes dinner. She eats standing at the counter. She does not call her mother. She does not open the laptop again.

At ten she lies down in bed and she reaches for the book on the nightstand, which is a volume of Ibn Hazm in her mentor's Spanish, and she opens it at random. The pages fall to a chapter on parting. She reads two paragraphs and closes the book without marking her place.

She turns out the light.

In the dark, just before sleep, she thinks about Yusuf asking her if she could teach him to hear what she hears. She thinks about the expression on his face when he asked. She thinks that somewhere in a different country, a younger woman is asking an older woman the same question about something else, and she thinks that the world has always been carried in this way, from one mouth to another, from one pair of ears to the next, and she thinks, with a small clarity that surprises her, that whatever else happens, this chain has not yet been broken.

She sleeps.

Chapter 7
Conviction

قالوا الطريقُ طويلٌ قلتُ ليس كذا إن كانَ في القلبِ ما يَهوى مُنْتَظَرا

Dijeron: el camino es largo. Dije: no es así, si en el corazón aguarda lo que se ama.

They said: the road is long. I said: it is not, if what the heart loves waits at the end.

—Anonymous

Andalusian, probably 11th c.

Translator's note in the margin reads only: *verdad.* True. The single Spanish word, in his handwriting, without further comment. He did this sometimes. A commentary of one word.

Saturday morning. She is not at the compound. Her apartment is very quiet.

Nadia wakes at seven, which is the latest she has slept in weeks. She lies in bed for a few minutes before she remembers that it is the weekend, that there is nowhere she has to be. The knowledge is

strange. She has been operating for weeks on a schedule that did not distinguish days, because the work did not distinguish days, because the war does not distinguish days. Now there is a free Saturday morning, a gift of empty hours, and she does not immediately know what to do with it.

She makes coffee. She stands at the counter with the coffee, as she has done every morning since Ben died, but she notices, this morning, that the standing has begun to feel like a habit rather than a refusal. She considers sitting. She sits. The small dining table in the corner is dusty. She has not used it in months.

She drinks her coffee sitting at the table.

After the coffee she decides she will clean the apartment. The company cleaning service comes on Mondays, so everything is technically clean, but there are small accumulations the service does not touch. Piles of mail on the entry table. A stack of work papers she has brought home and left on the desk. Books she has started and set down in various rooms.

She starts with the books and moves through the apartment, gathering them one by one. A paperback of Mahmoud Darwish she brought from Houston. A hardcover history of the British Mandate she bought at a conference in London three years ago and has not finished. A thin volume of poems by a contemporary Iraqi woman that Ingrid sent her the previous Christmas. And, on the floor beside her bed where it has been for over a week, her mentor's analysis of Aribic-Andalusian poetry, *Ajimez Antologia de poesin Andalusi*.

She gathers them all onto the coffee table. She sits on the couch and looks at the stack. She has the morning. She has no particular reason not to read.

She reaches for the *Ajimez*.

The book is a university press edition from Madrid, published in the year she completed her doctorate. He gave it to her that spring, at the small dinner his department threw for her defense. He had inscribed it on the title page in his careful hand: *Para Nadia, que escucha. Con cariño, el maestro.* "For Nadia, who listens. With affection, the teacher." She remembers the dinner. She remembers the way he had said *el maestro*, not as a title he claimed but as one he was mocking, a little, in the way of a man who had seen enough of academic titles to know what they were worth.

She opens the book at random, which is something she does with this volume, a practice she has not quite admitted to herself is a form of divination.

The pages open to the chapter called *On Forgetting.* Her mentor's translation reads the opening lines as a question. *Can the one who loved truly forget, or does he only teach himself not to remember?*

She reads for a few minutes. She closes the book.

She thinks, without meaning to, of the afternoon she asked him the question.

It had been April in Granada, the year before her defense. A Wednesday. His office hours. She had gone to see him about a chapter she was struggling with, the chapter on the treatment of the imperative mood in medieval Arabic love poetry, the chapter he had written her about in the voicemail she still keeps. His office was on the second floor of the Filosofía y Letras building, with a window that looked out onto a courtyard where a single orange tree grew.

He had been sitting at his desk when she came in. He waved her to the chair opposite. They had talked for perhaps half an hour about the imperative, about the particular problem she was having with rendering one of Ibn Hazm's lines into Spanish without flattening the

urgency of the original. He had been patient. He had suggested three alternatives, and he finally said, with the small shrug that meant he was letting her off the hook, that the line might simply be untranslatable, and that she should say so in a footnote and move on.

She had been about to leave when she had asked the question.

She does not remember now exactly how she phrased it. It had not been a considered question. It had been the kind of question a graduate student asks at the end of a long conversation, when her defenses are down and her curiosity is casual. She had said something like: *do you think, at some point, that machines will be able to do difficult translations like this?*

She had meant Ibn Hazm. She had meant the specific line they had just spent thirty minutes on. She had meant, in the way of a young woman in the late 2000s who had just started using Google Translate for things she was too tired to do properly, whether there would come a time when the tools would be good enough to handle even a difficult translation like the one they had been discussing.

He did not answered immediately.

He looked at her for what seemed like a long time. Then he stood up, walked to the window, and stood with his back to her for perhaps ten seconds, looking out at the orange tree in the courtyard.

Then he turned around.

"Nadia," he said.

His voice was raised yet. He was only beginning. She remembers this specifically because of what followed.

"Nadia. Let me tell you something about the machines."

He began pacing. He paced between the window and the bookshelf on the opposite wall, a distance of perhaps four steps each way, and as he paced, the volume of his voice began to rise.

"The machines," he said, "are very good. They are getting better. I will grant you this. They can translate a phrase. They can translate a paragraph. They can translate a business contract. They can translate a weather report. They can translate the things that matter very little whether they are translated well or badly, because the meaning of such things does not depend on the translation. A weather report is a weather report. If the machine says *it will rain tomorrow* when a human would have said *there is a chance of rain tomorrow,* the person with the umbrella is, on average, not worse off."

He was picking up speed. His hands began to do the thing they did when he was building toward something, which was a slow rotation at the wrists, as if he were turning something invisible.

"But Ibn Hazm, Nadia, is not a weather report. Ibn Hazm is a man, dead for a thousand years, who loved a woman and then lost her and then wrote a book trying to understand what had happened to him. He wrote it in a language that no longer exists in exactly the form he wrote it. He wrote it inside a culture that no longer exists. He wrote it for readers who would recognize every allusion, every echo, every borrowing, every reversal of a previous poet's phrase. Do you understand what I am saying? The line you and I just worked on for thirty minutes, the line about the imperative, is not simply a string of words. It is the residue of a civilization. It is what remains when a civilization has finished its work of thinking about a feeling and has pressed that thinking into eight words."

He stopped. He had pointed at her, not with anger but with the conviction of a man who had reached the part of his argument he cared most about.

"The machine, Nadia, can match the words. It can do this already, and it will continue to do it ever better. The machine can match the grammar. This is easy. The machine can even, in time, match the metrical pattern, the assonance, the formal architecture. This too is a matter of time and data. But the machine cannot do the thing the translator does. The translator carries the *civilization* across. The translator says: here is what this man knew that no one in your language has ever known, and I will do the impossible thing of putting it into your language in a way that honors what he knew, and you, the reader, will understand something you did not understand before, and you will understand it because I, the translator, stood between the two of you and gave up my life to the task."

He had walked back to his desk, sat down, and looked at her across his desk with an expression that was almost weary, as if the argument had exhausted him.

"The machines will never do this, Nadia. They cannot do it. They are not built to do it. They are built to approximate, and approximation is the enemy of what a translator does. The approximation is what the lazy call translation. The real thing is something else entirely. It is an act of hospitality between civilizations. It is a gift one culture gives to another. And a gift, Nadia, cannot be automated, because the moment you automate a gift it stops being a gift and becomes a transaction."

He stopped. Looked at her.

"Now," he had said, more quietly. "Go home. Rewrite the chapter. And when you are next tempted to wonder whether the machines will do what we do, remember this conversation, and remember that I told you: *they will not!* They will do something else. They will call that something else translation, and the world will accept the name, because the world accepts whatever it is told as long as

the telling is cheap enough. But you and I will know the difference. And you, Nadia, you will teach your students the difference, and they will teach theirs. This is how the real thing is passed on. It is how it has always been passed on. It is the only way it survives."

She had walked home along the Darro, past the stone bridge, up the slope toward the Albayzín, with his voice still in her head.

Nadia puts the Ibn Hazm down on her coffee table.

She is smiling.

She is smiling because she can see him, as clearly as if he were in the apartment with her, pacing between a window and a bookshelf, his hands rotating at the wrists, his voice building toward the sentence he was about to deliver as if no one had ever thought of it before, which was his way, which was his gift. She is smiling at the sheer force of him. She is smiling at the way he had said *approximation is the enemy*, as if he were announcing a doctrine. She is smiling at how much she had loved him, and how much she still does, and how little the loving has been diminished by his absence.

She is smiling, also, at the part of what he said that was wrong.

He had been right about the work. He had been right about what translation requires. He had been right about the difference between a gift and a transaction.

But he had been wrong about the machines. Not in the way he thought they might fail. In the way he did not imagine they could succeed at the thing he had dismissed. The machines are not going to carry the civilization across. He was right about that. But they are going to replace the people who do, because the market has decided that the carrying is not worth paying for, and the machines will do the cheaper thing, and the cheaper thing will be called translation, as he predicted, and the world will accept the name. He saw this. What he did not see,

what she is sitting with now on a Saturday morning in Doha, is that the replacement will happen anyway. His conviction did not stop it. Her conviction will not stop it. Ingrid's daughter's conviction will not stop it.

The question is no longer *whether.* The question is what she does inside the thing that is happening.

Nadin picks up her notebook from the nightstand, brings it to the couch. She writes, below what she wrote on Friday:

He said the real thing is passed from teacher to student, and that this is how it survives. Yusuf asked me on Friday to teach him to hear the villages. I do not yet know what I will say to Weller on Tuesday. But I know what I will say to Yusuf when there is time.

She reads it. She adds:

Maestro. I am still listening.

Her apartment is very quiet. The morning light has moved across the floor while she was remembering. The coffee in her cup is cold.

She gets up and pours the coffee down the sink. She makes another cup and brings it back to the couch where she sits down with the Ibn Hazm still open beside her.

She does not think about Weller. She does not think about Rania. She does not think about the rollout or the notebook or the war. Instead, she reads the poetry of a man who has been dead for a thousand years talking about the strangeness of forgetting someone you once loved, and she finds, by the time she closes the book, that something in her has been resolved.

Chapter 8
Tuesday

لا تَحْسَبَنَّ السُكوتَ إقراراً فَالصمتُ قد يَحمِلُ اعتِراضاً

No creas que el silencio es consentimiento. El silencio a veces lleva una objeción.

Do not suppose that silence is consent. Silence sometimes carries an objection.

—Ibn al-Rumi, 9th c.

Note from translator's margin: *the problem with silence as objection is that it looks like consent until the moment it does not, by which point the objector may be the only one who knows what was meant.*

Tuesday arrives the way Tuesdays arrive in her life these days, without ceremony. Nadia wakes at five-forty without the alarm. She lies in bed for a few minutes, watching the ceiling, thinking about nothing in particular. Then she gets up.

She dresses with more care than usual. Not because she wants to impress Weller, but because dressing carefully is a thing she has

learned to do when she needs to be steady. A gray skirt she has not worn since Houston, a cream blouse, a light scarf she can pull up if the air conditioning in the conference room is aggressive. Low heels. The small gold earrings her mother gave her when she turned thirty.

She looks at herself in the bathroom mirror. She looks like a woman who is about to take a meeting. This is useful.

Bishal is not back. The Qatari driver picks her up at six-forty. She has learned his name now. Hassan. He is polite, efficient, not talkative. They do not speak on the ride. She watches the city. A cargo plane, silver-gray, unmarked, is descending toward Al Udeid in the distance.

At the compound the guards wave her through. She signs in at seven-oh-two. Her queue shows 1,603 items. She opens the first one and begins to work.

She does not think about the upcoming meeting. She has decided, over the weekend, that she will not rehearse anything. Rehearsal is how people commit themselves to positions before they know what they are facing. She will go in. She will listen. She will answer what is asked. She will not volunteer what is not asked. Her mentor had taught her this as a technique for academic conferences, and it has served her well ever since.

She works through her queue for two hours, corrects where corrections are needed, and approves where they are not. The Rania-related items are still arriving. She has now memorized fourteen of their log codes, without writing them down. She has not opened the most recent ones. She will open them tonight, after the meeting, when she knows what the meeting has changed.

At nine-forty Denise appears at her pod.

"He is here," Denise says quietly. "Conference room three. Ten o'clock. Just you and him this time."

"All right."

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"Listen carefully to what he offers."

"I will."

Denise hesitates. She has something else she wants to say, but she does not say it. Instead, she nods, once, and walks back toward her office.

Conference room three is smaller than the one they met in before. A round table, four chairs, a pitcher of water and two glasses already set out, a single screen on one wall that is dark. Weller is already seated when Nadia arrives. He stands when she comes in.

"Nadia. Thanks for coming."

"Of course."

He is wearing the gray suit again. He has added a tie today, a pale blue one, which suggests he is taking the meeting more seriously than the group briefing last week. She files this.

They sit across from each other. He pours water for both of them. He takes a sip from his glass. He sets it down.

"I want to start by thanking you for your question the other day," he says. "The accuracy methodology question. I thought about it over the weekend, and I want to give you a fuller answer than I was able to give in the group setting."

"All right."

"The short version is that your question was correct. The methodology, as currently implemented, treats the model's original output as ground truth for the purpose of computing the headline accuracy score. Reviewer corrections are logged separately. They inform training updates on a quarterly cycle, but they do not retroactively adjust the accuracy score."

He is watching her as he says this. His face is neutral.

"Thank you for telling me," she says.

"I want to be transparent with you, Nadia, because I think you are the kind of linguist who deserves transparency. The methodology is a known issue. It is being addressed. The next version of the metrics framework will incorporate reviewer corrections more fully. But for the purposes of the current rollout, the decision has been made at levels above mine to proceed with the existing framework."

"I understand."

"I want to say one more thing. The decision to proceed with the existing framework is not, as I think you may be worrying, a cynical decision. The timeline is being driven by factors our program has no control over. The customer needs this capability deployed at scale before the end of May. The methodology will be refined in subsequent phases. For now, we proceed with what we have."

"The customer being the government."

"The customer being the government, yes."

"And the reason the capability needs to be deployed before the end of May is related to the current conflict."

He pauses. He takes another sip of water.

"Nadia, I’m not going to discuss operational justifications for a classified program timeline with you in this room. I will say that the timeline is not arbitrary. I will say that lives are at stake. And I will also say that the customer has weighed the tradeoffs and reached a decision."

"The customer has decided that imperfect accuracy, deployed at scale, is better than higher accuracy delayed," Nadia states plainly.

"The customer has decided that the capability is needed now, in its current form, and that the benefits of deployment outweigh the costs of the known limitations."

"I see."

He is watching her carefully. She is giving him nothing to read, which she knows is itself a kind of reading, but there is no way around this.

"Nadia. I want to talk to you about what happens after the rollout."

"All right."

"The post-rollout structure, as I mentioned last week, involves a significantly smaller footprint of linguists per theater. Four to six, as I said. These will not be review roles in the current sense. They will be quality assurance roles, sampling a percentage of the model's output on a rolling basis and producing monthly reports on observed patterns. The role reports directly to program leadership. It has significantly more autonomy than the current reviewer position. It also pays significantly more."

"How much more."

He names a figure. It is roughly double what she currently earns.

"The role I want you to consider," he says, "is the senior QA lead for the Levant theater. Based here in Doha for at least the first year, with travel to other sites as needed. You would be the senior-most linguistic

authority on Levantine dialects in the program. You would report directly to me. Although I would be your customer interface, I wouldn’t be managing your technical work. You would be managing your own technical work."

"I see."

"I am not asking for an answer today. The rollout is scheduled for May nineteenth. I want to name the senior QA leads by May first. That gives you about three weeks to think about it."

"What would the senior QA lead actually do."

"Review model outputs on a sampling basis. Identify patterns of error. Produce monthly reports. Brief senior customer representatives on findings. Provide linguistic consultation on high-value items when requested."

"High-value items meaning."

"Items that are going to drive operational decisions. The current review queue you are working now, multiplied by ten, reduced to the items that matter most and routed to a linguist who can provide judgment rather than throughput."

"And my judgment would be incorporated into operational decisions."

"Your judgment would be one of the inputs."

"One of the inputs."

"Nadia, I will not lie to you. The model will still have primary authority over dispositions. The senior QA lead provides a check, not a veto. But the check is significant. The senior QA lead has the ear of program leadership. The senior QA lead's reports are read at a level where they can influence policy and methodology in ways a reviewer's corrections currently cannot."

She looks at him for a long moment. He is telling her the truth, as far as he knows it. He believes what he is saying. He believes the role has real authority. He believes he is offering her something valuable. He is not wrong, exactly. He is also not exactly right either. The role will give her more access but no authority, which is an exchange she needs to think about carefully.

"Can I ask you a question, Robert."

"Of course."

"What happens to the reviewer pool. The current linguists. After the rollout."

He exhales. He has been expecting this.

"Most will be released. Some will be offered positions on the QA teams across the different theaters, which is the small footprint I mentioned. Some will be offered severance. The contractor has a transition program. It is better than the industry standard. I want you to know that we are taking seriously the obligation to the people who have been doing this work."

"Fifteen of the eighteen linguists on the Doha floor will be released."

"Approximately, yes."

"Including linguists who have been in this work for their entire careers."

"Yes."

"Including linguists who are not going to find comparable work anywhere else, because comparable work is not going to exist anywhere else after the rollout."

"Nadia. The transition is real. I understand that. The program cannot solve for the broader dislocation. What the program can do is offer a small number of senior positions to the most qualified linguists in the

system, which is what I am doing now. I am offering you one of those positions because you are one of the most qualified linguists in the system."

"And if I decline."

"Then I will offer it to someone else. There is no punishment for declining, Nadia. You would continue in your current role through the rollout. After that, you would be released with severance like the others. The severance for someone at your level is substantial."

"How substantial."

He names a figure. It is approximately a year's current salary.

"I appreciate the transparency," she says.

"I am trying to be fair to you, Nadia. I am aware that this is a difficult transition for everyone involved. I want the people who choose to stay with the program to stay with a clear understanding of what they are choosing. I want the people who choose to leave to leave with a clear understanding of what they are leaving behind, and with resources that allow them to make the transition with some dignity."

He means it. This is the part that surprises her. He is not a bad person. He is a man who has convinced himself that the position he is offering her is an honorable one, and who has further convinced himself that by offering severance rather than firing people outright he is doing his professional duty to the extent his role permits. He has done this convincing in good faith. He will sleep tonight in a hotel in West Bay thinking he has had a difficult conversation and handled it well.

"Robert, let me ask you one more thing."

"Please."

"The priority three designation. The category that elevates certain subjects into continuous monitoring and kinetic consideration. Who makes those designations."

The air in the room shifts. It is a very small shift. Weller's face does not change. But something behind his eyes calibrates, the way it had calibrated the last time she had asked him a question he had not prepared for.

"That is a process question, Nadia. I can take it back to the technical team if you want a full answer. The short version is that the designations are algorithmically generated based on a combination of factors, including model outputs, associated metadata, and input from customer analysts."

"Including input from reviewer assessments."

"Including that as one of the inputs, yes."

"So if a reviewer writes in a review field that context is unclear and that additional collection is requested before categorical assessment, that assessment can be one of the inputs that contributes to a priority three designation on a subject."

A pause.

"Depending on the specifics of the case," Weller says carefully, "and the other inputs in the aggregation, yes, that is possible."

"Thank you."

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"Is there something specific you are concerned about."

"No. I’m just trying to better understand the system I work in."

"I understand," he says.

He does not believe her. She does not expect him to. But the exchange has been conducted within the rules of what can be said in a room of this kind, and neither of them is going to step outside those rules today.

He stands up. He extends his hand.

"Take your three weeks, Nadia. Think about the offer. If you have more questions, Denise knows how to reach me."

She stands. She takes his hand. His handshake is the same firm, practiced handshake from before.

"Thank you, Robert."

"Thank you."

She walks back to her desk. Priya is at her pod, watching her approach. Nadia gives her a small nod that means *I am fine, I will tell you later, not here.* Priya nods back.

At her desk Nadia puts her headphones on. She opens the next item in her queue. She works for the rest of the day as if the meeting had not happened.

At six-fifteen she signs out. Her car is waiting for her at the gate. She rides home in silence.

In her apartment, Nadia changes out of the skirt and blouse. She puts on jeans and a t-shirt and pours herself a glass of water. She sits on the couch without turning on the lights.

She thinks about what Weller said. She thinks about what he did not say. She thinks about the exchange on the priority three designation, and the small shift in his face when she asked the question, and what that shift told her about what he knows and what he has decided to not know.

He told her the truth, within the limits of what he could tell her. He told her that the system's accuracy methodology treats model output as ground truth. He told her that reviewer corrections feed back into quarterly training updates but do not adjust the current accuracy score. He told her that the rollout timeline is being driven by the war, and that lives are at stake, and that the customer has decided the benefits outweigh the costs.

She believes him. All of it.

She also now knows, because he effectively confirmed it, that her careful sentence on the Rania call had been aggregated as one of the inputs that elevated Rania to priority three. Her own words, her own name in the reviewer field had been a factor in the attention on a woman she had not seen in twenty-three years.

The job offer is a real offer. The position has real authority, within the limits he described. If she takes it, she will have more access to what is happening to Rania, possibly more authority to influence dispositions in individual cases, more ability to witness the system from closer to its center. She will also, in accepting the offer, legitimize the rollout. She will be the senior linguistic authority whose presence allows the program to claim that human judgment is in the loop, when the loop has already been redesigned to route around the judgment.

If she declines the offer, she will be released in May with a year's severance. She will be free of the program, but she will also be outside of it, which means she will have no further ability to affect what happens to Rania or to anyone else in that position.

The choice is not between a good option and a bad option. The choice is between two bad options, each of which has an argument for it that the other cannot fully refute.

She thinks about this for a long time.

Then she gets up and goes to her nightstand and takes out the notebook. She brings it to the couch and opens it to the page where she has last been writing.

She does not write for a moment.

Then she writes, in her careful English:

He offered me the job. He told me the truth, or enough of the truth that I can see the rest of it. The role has real authority over individual cases and no authority over the system as a whole. If I take it, I will be inside. If I decline, I will be outside. I cannot decide yet which of these matters more for what I need to do.

She reads it. She adds:

I have three weeks. I will use them.

She closes the notebook and puts it back in the drawer.

In the kitchen, she eats standing at the counter tonight. The Saturday's small victory of sitting at the table has not generalized into a daily practice. Some habits are harder to break than she had thought. She finishes the pasta, washes the plate.

At ten she goes to bed. In the dark she thinks, just before sleep, about what her mentor would have said about the offer. She cannot quite hear him. He was never asked a question like this in his lifetime. He died before the machines forced it. She is going to have to answer it without him.

Chapter 9
The Week That Followed

الوَقتُ سَيفٌ إن لم تَقطَعهُ قَطَعَك فَاحذَر مِنَ السَيفِ إذا لم تَستَعمِله

El tiempo es una espada: si no la blandes, te corta. Cuídate de la espada cuando no la usas.

Time is a sword. If you do not wield it, it cuts you. Beware the sword when you are not the one using it.

—Attributed to al-Shafi'i, 9th c.

Translator noted: *the metaphor is brutal because the reality is brutal. There is no neutral relationship to time. You are using it, or it is using you.*

Wednesday

Nadia arrives at the compound at seven. Her queue shows 1,742 items, the highest number she has seen since starting the job. Some of the increase is due to the war. Some is due to the reduced staffing. Some, she suspects, is due to a deliberate tightening of the throughput requirements in the weeks before the rollout, a way of demonstrating

that the human reviewers cannot keep up, which will be cited in the rollout briefings as evidence that the new model is necessary.

She works through the morning. She corrects what needs correcting and approves what does not. She opens two of the Rania-tagged items and listens to them. She memorizes. She writes nothing.

At eleven Yusuf comes by her pod.

"Nadia. Do you have a few minutes."

"For what."

"You said you would teach me to hear the villages. I have an item I've been working on for an hour, and I think I'm close, but I want to listen with you."

She looks at him. She has a queue of seventeen hundred items. She has a job offer to think about. She has Rania to track. She has not slept enough.

"Now is fine," she says.

He pulls up a chair and opens the audio on her terminal.

The audio is a voice call, two minutes long, between a woman and a man. The woman is the older speaker. She is angry about something. The man is conciliatory.

"Bekaa," Yusuf says. "I'm almost certain. The vowels in the woman's speech."

"Listen again."

He listens again. She watches his face.

"Bekaa," he says.

"Where in the Bekaa."

"I do not know."

"Listen to the way she says *ana*. The first time, at twenty seconds. Listen to where she places the emphasis."

He listens. He plays it back. He listens once more.

"It's on the second syllable. That's unusual?"

"It's unusual for central Bekaa. It's normal for upper Bekaa, the villages closer to the Syrian border. Specifically the corridor between Hermel and the border. The pattern survives in three or four villages. I can't tell you which one without more audio. But the pattern places her in that corridor."

He is writing on his pad. His handwriting is the same careful cramped script she noticed earlier.

"What's she angry about," he asks.

"Listen to the words. What does she say?"

"She says her son did something he shouldn't have done. She says the family is going to have to send him away. She says the man on the call is partly to blame because he should have stopped him."

"What did the son do."

"It isn't clear from the audio. She doesn't name it."

"What does she say specifically about what he did?"

"She says *huwwe a'mil shi ma byinmal*."

"Translate the phrase for me."

"He did something that is not done."

"Yes. Now listen to the way she says *ma byinmal*. The cadence. The pause before *byinmal*."

He listens.

"There’s a slight pause. She’s hesitating before the verb."

"Why is she hesitating?"

"Because the verb is doing the work. Because the thing he did is something so far outside the acceptable that she can’t describe it directly. The phrase is a euphemism."

"For what."

"In that region, in a woman of her generation, the phrase typically refers to something dishonorable involving a woman. An affair, usually. Possibly something worse. The phrase is the way an older woman describes a sexual transgression in front of a male relative without naming it."

Yusuf is quiet for a moment.

"So this is a domestic crisis."

"This is a family deciding what to do with a young man who has done something that is going to ruin the family's standing in the village. They are deciding whether to send him away. They are not going to send him to a training camp. They are going to send him to a cousin in Brazil."

"The model has flagged this as relevant to a network of interest."

"The model has heard the words *send him away* and *something that is not done* and has built a story out of them. The story is not a story. It is a domestic emergency. The network of interest, in this case, is the family."

He writes. He sets down his pen.

"How did you know it was the cousin in Brazil."

"I didn’t know. I’m guessing. In that region, the diaspora cousins are usually in Brazil or Australia. The family will choose

whichever one is most willing to take a young man who needs to disappear for a while. Sao Paulo and Sydney both have communities from this corridor."

"You’re guessing?"

"Yes."

"But the guess is informed."

"The guess is what an older woman from a village in that corridor would think of when her sister told her about a similar problem. I’m not in the corridor, but I’m close enough to it."

He nods. He is taking this seriously.

"Nadia. Can I ask you something else."

"Yes."

"Why are you teaching me?"

She does not answer immediately.

"Because you asked," she says.

"That is part of it."

"Yes."

"What is the rest of it."

She looks at him. She is making a decision, in this small moment, about how much to tell him. She has decided several things over the past few days, but this is not one of them. She decides now.

"Because what I know is going to leave the system, Yusuf. I am one of perhaps four or five people on this floor who can hear that pattern in the upper Bekaa. After the rollout, none of us will be reviewing items. The model will be doing the work, and the model will not hear it. If

you can hear it, that is one more pair of ears in the world that can. That is not nothing."

She catches herself, pauses, corrects.

"It *matters* to me," she says.

He has heard the correction. His expression changes very slightly, in a way she cannot fully read.

"Thank you," he says.

He gets up, takes his pad with him and goes back to his pod.

She watches him walk away and thinks: I have just spoken to someone for the first time in four months as if I had something to teach him. Her thinking is not pride. It is a small surprise, the surprise of remembering a thing about herself she had not had occasion to remember.

She returns to her queue.

Thursday

A message from Ingrid arrives at four in the afternoon Doha time.

Nadia. My daughter has finished her Ibn Hazm paper. She has decided he is not entirely a misogynist, only partially one. I am told this is an improvement. Jonas returns tonight. I am cooking something Lebanese in your honor. I will not embarrass us by sending a photograph. Tell me you are eating.

Nadia replies that evening from her apartment.

Ingrid. I am eating. Slowly, but I am eating. There is a man at work I have begun to teach. He is younger and earnest. He reminded me today that I have things to pass on. I had forgotten this. There is also a decision I am being asked to make. I cannot tell you what it is. I will tell you what I decide. Cook your

Lebanese dinner. Tell Jonas I love him. Tell your daughter that Ibn Hazm earns his complications.

Ingrid writes back twenty minutes later.

A man at work. A decision you cannot tell me. I will not press you on either. I will say only this. Whoever the man is, the teaching is good for you. And whatever the decision is, it is yours to make, and you are equipped to make it. Your teacher told me once that you were the only one of his students he never worried about. I asked him why. He said: because she carries her own scales.

Nadia reads this. She reads it again.

She does not reply that night, closes her laptop and sits on the couch in the dark.

Nadia has not heard before that her mentor said this about her. She has now been told two things by Ingrid, that her mentor said in his last years. Neither has been a thing Nadia would have predicted he would say. Both have arrived at exactly the moment she needed to hear them, which is either Ingrid's intelligence or Ingrid's grace, or both.

She carries her own scales.

She thinks: that is what he meant. That is what he was telling me when he said *she listens.* He meant that I can weigh the thing I am hearing, and I can decide what it is, without reference to someone else's measure. He meant that I am alone with my judgment, and that he trusted me with that aloneness. He was not telling me I was right about everything. He was telling me I was responsible.

The thought stays with her for a long time.

She sleeps that night without difficulty.

Friday

The news from Lebanon is bad.

A village in the south has been struck. The strike was carried out by aircraft. Twenty-three people are dead, including seven children. The target, according to the Israeli military, was a senior figure in a network. The figure is named in the announcement. The name is not one Nadia knows.

She reads the news on her phone in the morning before she leaves for the compound. She reads several accounts. The accounts agree on the death toll. They disagree on whether the target was actually present in the village at the time of the strike. Two accounts say he had left an hour before. One account says he was never there. The Israeli military stands by the targeting.

She reads the names of the dead. She does not recognize any of them. She does not know the village.

At the compound she works through her queue. She does not open the Rania-tagged items. She has decided, for today, not to listen. She is afraid of what she will hear.

At lunchtime Priya finds her in the courtyard. They sit together at a small table.

"You saw the news," Priya says.

"Yes."

"There are going to be more of them. The pattern has shifted. The customer is moving from the watch list to the action list, and the threshold for moving a name from one to the other has dropped."

"How do you know."

"I know because I have been here longer than you, and because I have a friend on the analyst side who sometimes tells me things he should not. Take it as you will."

"Thank you for telling me."

"There is something else. I am going to say it once, and then I am not going to say it again, because I am not sure I am supposed to say it at all."

"All right."

"The QA position Weller is offering you. He has offered it to two other people on the floor. They both turned it down."

Nadia looks at her.

"Who."

"Farouk. Me."

"Why did you turn it down."

"Because I am fifty-one years old and I do not want to spend the last working years of my career presiding over the dismantling of a profession I have given my life to. Because the severance is enough for me to live on for a year while I decide what to do next. Because the position is, in my judgment, a fig leaf, and I do not wish to be a leaf on that particular fig."

"You think I should turn it down."

"I think the decision is yours. I am telling you the offer is not unique. He is recruiting. He needs at least one of us to take it. He will keep recruiting until he gets one. If you decline, he will offer it to someone else. The position will be filled. The rollout will proceed. Your declining will not stop anything. Your accepting will not stop anything either. The decision is about what you can live with."

Priya stands up. She gathers her tray.

"That is the last I am going to say about it. Whatever you decide, Nadia, I will respect it. I am telling you what I am telling you because I want you to make the decision with full information."

"Thank you, Priya."

"You are welcome."

She walks away.

Nadia sits at the table for a few minutes after she has gone.

Sunday

She does not go to the compound on Saturday or Sunday this week. The rollout schedule has been adjusted. The contractor has decided the linguists need a real weekend, perhaps because the throughput numbers were starting to collapse, perhaps because someone in HR raised the question of burnout, perhaps because Weller's calendar required it. She does not investigate the reason. She accepts the days.

On Sunday evening she opens her laptop. She does not message Ingrid. She opens the system she should not be opening, which is a personal cloud account she has kept since graduate school, with documents and notes and old translations. She creates a new folder. She names it nothing in particular and begins, for the first time in a long time, to make some notes.

Not in the notebook. The notebook is for short notes. This is something else. She writes a paragraph describing the priority three system as she understands it. She writes a paragraph describing the override mechanism that restored the model's disposition over her review on the Rania call. She writes a paragraph describing the conversation with Weller about the accuracy methodology. She writes a paragraph describing what Priya told her in the courtyard.

She writes for two hours. For some reason she doesn’t explore too closely, she does not save the document to the cloud. Instead, she saves it locally, on a small encrypted drive she has owned since before her marriage, which she keeps in a drawer beneath her

socks. She has used the drive perhaps three times in fifteen years, for tax records and for a draft of an article that was never published. The drive is old. The encryption is old. It is also not connected to any system that would notice.

She has not committed to anything by writing this. She has only made a record. The record exists now, on a piece of hardware, in a drawer, in an apartment in Doha.

She sleeps.

Monday

In the morning she opens her terminal and her queue is at 1,890 items, the highest yet. She works through it. She corrects what needs correcting. She approves what does not.

At eleven she opens the next Rania-tagged item.

This one is different.

Rania is speaking with Salma, the woman she calls most often. The woman whose name Nadia has now memorized, whose voice she has begun to recognize, whose tone with Rania is the tone of an old friend.

Salma is telling Rania about a meeting. The meeting is on Wednesday. The meeting is in a particular village in the south. Salma names the village.

Rania says she will be there.

Salma says good, because the others want to see her.

The call is forty seconds long.

Nadia plays it again. She memorizes the village name. She memorizes the day. Wednesday.

She closes the item, marks it reviewed and writes nothing.

She continues with her queue.

At the end of the day, on the ride home, she watches the city pass and she thinks about Wednesday.

The village Salma named is one Nadia knows. It is twelve kilometers from the village where her grandmother had the house. It is the village where, when she was nine, her mother had once driven her through, and where the funeral she scrolled past on her phone six days ago had taken place.

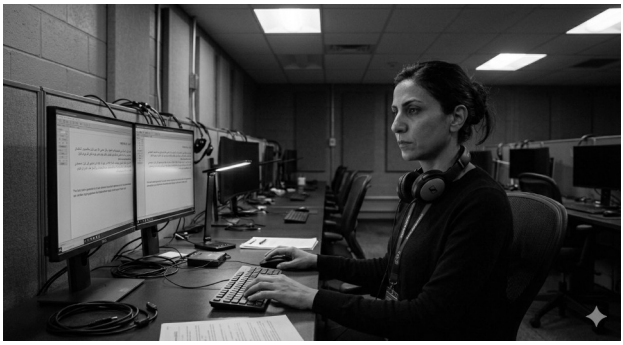
The system has been listening to Rania for two weeks. The system is now in possession of a date and a location for a meeting Rania will attend.

Nadia does not know what the system will do with this information. She knows only that the system can do something with it.

She also knows, with a clarity that surprises her, that she has less time than she once thought.

Whatever she is going to do about the Weller offer, she has to decide before Wednesday.

Chapter 10
The Day Before



ما كلُّ ما يَتَمَنّى المَرءُ يُدرِكُهُ تَجري الرِياحُ بِما لا تَشتَهي السُفُنُ

No todo lo que el hombre desea lo alcanza. Soplan los vientos en contra de lo que las naves anhelan.

Not all that a person wishes is reached. The winds blow against what the ships desire.

—al-Mutanabbi, 10th c.

The translator noted: *the ships do not stop sailing. The wisdom of the line is not that we should give up. It is that we should sail anyway, knowing.*

Nadia does not sleep on Monday night. She lies in bed for several hours, watching the ceiling, and at three in the morning she gets up and she sits on the couch in the dark with a glass of water and she does not turn on the lights. She does not read. She does not open her laptop. She simply sits.

Nadia is not deliberating. She is past deliberation. The deliberation phase ended when she heard Salma name the village. What she is doing now is something closer to settling, the way water settles after it

has been disturbed. She is letting the things she is going to do come up from underneath, into the part of her mind that can act on them.

By five-thirty she has decided two things.

She has not decided about Weller. That decision, she now understands, is not the decision she needs to make first. It is downstream of what she is going to do today and tomorrow.

At six she showers. She dresses in ordinary work clothes, nothing chosen for an occasion, because today is not an occasion in the sense that Tuesday with Weller had been. Today is a working day. She wants to look like she is working.

The car is waiting at six-forty.

At the compound she signs in at seven-oh-six. Her queue shows 1,910 items. The number is meaningless now. She is not going to clear the queue again today. She is going to do specific things in specific places in the queue, and the rest will accumulate.

She works through the first hour normally. She corrects what needs correcting. She approves what does not. She is establishing her rhythm for the day's logs. A reviewer who slows down or speeds up or changes patterns is a reviewer who triggers downstream notice. She wants the day's pattern to look like every other day's pattern, until the moments when she needs it not to.

At eight-fifteen she opens the priority three queue.

She has not done this before. She has only opened the items that were already routed to her. The queue itself is visible to her by virtue of her clearance, but accessing it directly is a small step beyond what she has done in previous days. The system will log her access. The log will sit somewhere. The log will not, by itself,

mean anything to anyone. Reviewers access the priority three queue regularly. She is allowed to do this. It is not until she does something specific inside the queue that she will leave a fingerprint.

She scrolls.

There are eleven Rania-tagged items in the queue that have not yet been reviewed. Three are from the past twenty-four hours. The most recent is two hours old, time-stamped at six-fourteen this morning.

She opens the most recent.

It is a text message. From Rania to Salma. Three lines.

The car will pick me up at ten. I will be there by twelve. I will stay overnight. Tell the others I am bringing the photographs.

The model has flagged the message at confidence 0.94. The model has rendered *the photographs* in the English translation field as *the documents.*

This is the misreading.

In the original Arabic, the word Rania has used is *al-suwar*, plural, which can mean either photographs or documents depending on context. In standard usage in Lebanon, *suwar* used without qualification almost always means photographs. *Documents* would normally require a different word, *watha'iq* or *masharif*, which Rania has not used. The model has chosen the more operationally suggestive translation. The model has done what the model does.

Nadia does not have to think about what to do.

She types in the review field. She types slowly, with care. She writes:

Translation correction: al-suwar in this context means photographs, not documents. The Levantine usage of the term for documents is watha'iq, which speaker does not use. The phrase "I am bringing the photographs" is consistent with a personal social context. In family or

friendship contexts, photographs are commonly brought to gatherings to be shared, particularly when a member has been away or when a recent event has occurred that not all members have seen. Given the prior pattern of communication between these speakers, which has involved family and personal subject matter throughout, the more probable reading of this message is a personal visit involving the sharing of photographs, not a transfer of documents. Recommend re-classification of this item to lower priority pending clarification.

She reads what she has written.

She does not soften it. She does not insert hedges. The sentence is a direct translation correction, which is what she is paid to write. It is also, in this specific item, an assertion that the system has misread, and she is calling for the priority to be lowered.

She approves.

The system logs her review. She watches the log appear in the small notification panel at the bottom of her terminal. *Item 2026-04-22-LBN-0031. Reviewer assessment submitted.*

She moves to the next item.

She opens an older intercept, one she had previously listened to and marked reviewed without commentary. It is from last week. It is the call where Rania had told someone she would be at a particular address.

Nadia opens the review field. She types.

Late assessment. On further review: Speaker A's tone and cadence in this call are consistent with arrangements made between close personal contacts. The phrase "we will have to use the other route," which was previously cited as evidence of operational planning, in Levantine vernacular more typically refers to

alternate driving routes due to traffic, road conditions, or, in the current period, military checkpoints. Recommend reconsideration of this item's contribution to the subject's priority designation.

She approves.

She does this for four more items. Each one she had previously left without commentary. Each one she now writes a careful, defensible, professionally toned correction. Each correction argues, in the language of the system, for a less aggressive reading. Each correction is true, which is the only reason she is willing to write it.

She is not falsifying. She is doing the job she had stopped doing two weeks ago, because she decided two weeks ago that doing the job was lending the job her name. She has reconsidered. She has decided that not doing the job and doing the job badly are not the same thing. Done correctly, the job is what it is. Refusing to do it leaves the field to the model, which has no taste and no judgment and no village in its grandmother's hand.

She is not going to stop the targeting. She is not naive about this. The aggregate priority designation has too many inputs, and her corrections on six items are a small thing against the weight of the system. But she is going to make it harder. She is going to make the system, if it proceeds to action on Rania, proceed against the documented dissent of one of its most experienced reviewers. She is going to put a name on the dissent. Her name.

She is also going to leave a record inside the system that, if anyone ever looks, can be found.

She works through the six items in twenty minutes. She closes the priority three queue and returns to her ordinary review queue.

She works for the rest of the morning. She corrects what needs correcting. She approves what does not. She does not look back.

At lunchtime Nadia does not go to the courtyard. She goes to the small phone room on the third floor, which is a soundproofed room with one chair and one phone, intended for personal calls during the workday. She has not used it before.

She calls her mother.

Her mother answers on the second ring.

"Habibti."

"Mama."

"Are you all right."

"I am all right. I just wanted to hear your voice."

Her mother is quiet for a moment. She has not been called at lunchtime by Nadia in months.

"What is happening," her mother says.

"Nothing specific. I’m thinking about you today. I’m thinking about Daddy. I’m thinking about the house. Tell me about the garden."

Her mother tells her about the garden. The bougainvillea is in bloom. The lemon tree is producing. A neighbor's cat has discovered a corner of the yard and has been visiting daily. The new priest at the church is, her mother says with the small dry exactness she reserves for such judgments, *not as bad as I first thought.* This is approximately the highest compliment she pays.

They talk for ten minutes. Nadia does not tell her anything about the work. She does not tell her anything about Wednesday. She lets her mother fill the call with the small textures of the house in Braeswood, the garden, the neighbor's cat, the priest. She lets her mother be her mother for ten minutes.

"Mama."

"Yes."

"I love you."

"I know, habibti. I love you too. Why are you saying it like this."

"I just wanted to say it out loud. I think it every day."

Her mother is quiet again. Then she says, in a voice that is steady and that Nadia does not often hear from her: "Be careful. Whatever it is. Be careful, and come home when you can."

"I will, Mama."

"Promise me."

"I promise."

They hang up.

Nadia sits in the phone room for another minute before she goes back to her desk.

In the afternoon she works without incident. She corrects what needs correcting. She approves what does not. She does not return to the priority three queue.

At four o'clock Yusuf comes by her pod.

"Nadia. Do you have a minute."

"Yes."

He pulls up a chair. He does not have an audio file with him today. He has only his notepad.

"I wanted to ask you a question that is not about an item."

"All right."

"You said something on Wednesday. About passing what you can to whoever can hold it."

"Yes."

"I have been thinking about that."

"Yes."

"I want to ask you to teach me more. Not just dialect features. But the way of listening. The way of asking the question before the question. I don’t know what the right phrasing is. I don’t know if it is even a thing that can be taught. But I’d like to ask."

She looks at him.

"Yusuf. I want to tell you something."

"Yes."

"What you are asking is not an academic question. It is a moral question dressed as a craft question. I don’t know if you have thought about it that way."

"I have."

"You understand that this work is going to change after the rollout."

"I understand."

"And you understand that the kind of listening I do, and that I would teach you, may not have a place inside any system that comes after the rollout."

"I understand."

"Then yes. I will teach you. As much as I can in the time we have. I don’t know how long the time is. I want to be honest with you about that."

"I don’t need to know how long the time is, Nadia. I need to know whether you’ll say yes."

"I am saying yes."

"Thank you."

He stands up. He is, she sees, slightly emotional. He hides it well.

"We’ll start tomorrow," she says.

He nods and goes back to his pod.

She watches him go. She has just made him a promise she may not be able to keep. She has also made the promise because making it commits her to something she needs to be committed to. The teaching is real, and the teaching will continue for as long as she is in this seat. If she leaves the seat tomorrow, or in a week, or after the rollout, the teaching will end. But it will have started.

Her mentor used to say that the chain is what survives. Two ears that have learned to listen are two ears that did not exist before. The chain has not yet been broken.

She returns to her queue.

At six-fifteen she signs out. The car is waiting. She rides home in silence.

In her apartment she does not change clothes. She goes directly to her desk and opens her laptop.

She writes to Ingrid.

Ingrid. I am writing to you tonight because I want to tell you a few things you should know in case I am not able to tell them to you later. This is not a dramatic letter. I am not in immediate danger. I am writing it because I have begun to do small things that may,

eventually, have consequences for me, and I want someone outside the immediate situation to know what I have been thinking, and why.

I have a small encrypted drive in the drawer of my nightstand, beneath my socks. The drive contains notes about the work I am doing. The notes are not classified material. They are my own observations, written in my own words, about the system I work inside. If something happens to me, or if at some point I am in a situation where I cannot retrieve the drive myself, I would like the drive to come to you. Jonas can decide, with you, what to do with it. I trust both of your judgments.

The work I am doing matters to me less than the people the work is being done to. There is a woman I knew when I was a child, before the world became what it has become, and the system I work inside has begun to make decisions about her that are based on misreadings of who she is. I have been in a position to correct some of the misreadings. I have started doing so today. I do not know if my corrections will change anything. They will at least be on the record. My name will be on them.

I love you. Tell Jonas. Tell your daughter that the men in old books are easier to forgive when you remember they are dead, and harder to forgive when you remember they made you. She will understand someday what I mean.

She reads what she has written.

She does not soften it.

She sends it.

She closes her laptop and sits at her desk for a long time with her hands flat on the wood.

At ten she lies down in bed.

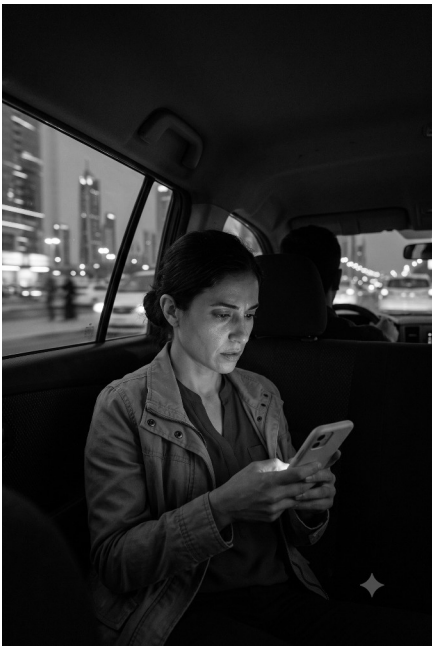
She thinks, briefly, about what she has done today. The six corrections. The call to her mother. The promise to Yusuf. The letter to Ingrid.

None of it stops what is going to happen tomorrow.

She thinks: this is what carrying his teaching forward looks like. Not heroism. Not refusal. Not even resistance, exactly. The willingness to do the work of careful attention even when the work cannot save what one is paying attention to. The willingness to put one's name on a true sentence in a system that is going to ignore it. The willingness to teach the next person, even when the next person may inherit a profession that no longer pays.

She thinks: he would not have called this courage. He would have called this *the work.*

Chapter 11
Wednesday



ما عَرَفَ الإنسانُ يَومَهُ إلا بَعدَ غُروبِهِ فَكَيفَ يَحكُمُ عَلى الفَجرِ قَبلَ زَوالِهِ

El hombre no conoce su día sino después del ocaso. ¿Cómo puede juzgar el alba antes de que pase?

A person does not know his day until after its setting. How can he judge the dawn before it has gone?

—Anonymous, Andalusian, probably 12th c.

Translator noted: *the line is humble in the way the truly intelligent lines are humble. We are not allowed to understand the day while we are inside it. We are only allowed to live it.*

Nadia wakes at four, which is two and a half hours before her alarm, and she does not pretend she is going to sleep again.

She lies in bed for ten minutes. Then she gets up.

The apartment is dark. She makes coffee. She drinks it standing at the counter. She does not turn on the news. She does not check her phone for news. She has decided, last night before sleep, that she will not begin the day with information she cannot do anything about.

At five-forty-five she dresses. She chooses clothes she has worn many times. She is not making a statement today. She wants the day to look like every other day, especially in retrospect, especially in her own memory.

The car is waiting at six-forty.

In the back of the car she checks her phone, finally. She scans the headlines. There is no news from Lebanon that is different from yesterday's news from Lebanon. The war continues. A strike in the north on Monday. Negotiations at the UN that are going nowhere. A statement from the Iranian foreign ministry. The usual.

Nothing about a village in the south. Nothing about a woman named Rania. The day has not yet broken on whatever is going to happen.

She puts her phone away.

At the compound she signs in at seven-oh-four. Her queue shows 2,033 items. She does not look at it long enough to register anything beyond the number.

She opens the priority three queue first. There are no new Rania items overnight. The most recent is still the photograph message from yesterday morning, the one she already corrected. Her correction is logged. The disposition has not been changed. The system has acknowledged her review and proceeded.

She closes the priority three queue. She works through her ordinary queue.

At nine Yusuf comes by her pod.

"Nadia. Today, if you have time."

"I have time."

He pulls up the chair. He has come prepared. He has a notepad with three audio file numbers written down, items he has already listened to once and wants to work through with her. He has written, in his cramped handwriting, the dialect features he thinks he has identified, and the questions he wants to ask.

She is grateful for his preparation. It means she does not have to lead the session. She can let him lead, and she can correct, and the work can fill the hour without her having to perform attention she does not have.

They work for an hour and a half. She listens, she asks, she corrects, she explains. He is a good student. He learns in the way she learned, by being told what to listen for and then listening for it. He does not ask her to repeat herself. He writes things down once and remembers them.

Toward the end of the session, on the third audio file, he stops in the middle of a phrase and looks at her.

"Nadia. Are you all right today."

"I am all right."

"You seem tired."

"I am tired. I didn’t sleep well."

He waits to see if she will say more. She does not. He returns to the audio.

She is grateful for this also. He has noticed, and he has decided not to press.

When the session is over he gathers his pad and stands.

"Thank you, Nadia."

"You're welcome."

He pauses, almost says something else but doesn't. He nods and walks back to his pod.

She watches him go. She thinks: he'll be fine. Whatever happens to me, he'll be fine. He has begun to listen. The chain has not been broken.

The thought is both true and not exactly relevant. She is using it to steady herself.

Nadia works through the late morning. She does not return to the priority three queue. She has decided she will check it in the afternoon, after the meeting in the village would have taken place *if* it took place, and not before. She does not want to be watching the queue at the moment something appears in it. She wants to be doing her work.

At twelve-thirty she goes to the courtyard for lunch. Priya is at the small table in the corner, eating alone. Nadia sits down across from her.

"Nadia."

"Priya."

"You're quiet today."

"It is a quiet day for me."

"Mm."

They eat for a few minutes without speaking.

"Nadia. Have you decided about the offer."

"Not yet."

"You have less time than you think."

"I know."

"He’s asking around. I think he’s going to make a backup offer to Farouk this afternoon. He told Denise this morning."

"Farouk will decline again."

"Farouk will decline again. But Weller will then move to the next name on his list, which I don’t know, and the position will be filled by someone. If you wanted it, the window is closing."

"I understand."

"Do you."

"I understand, Priya. I’m not going to take it."

The words come out before she decided to say them.

She isn’t sure when she decided. Possibly last night. Possibly this morning during the coffee. Possibly during the session with Yusuf, when she had thought *whatever happens to me, he will be fine.* The decision has been forming for days. She has been waiting for the moment when she would hear herself say it, and the moment is now, in the courtyard, across a small table from a colleague who has asked the right question at the right time.

Priya nods. She does not look surprised.

"All right," Priya says.

"You think it’is the right call."

"I think it’s your call."

"That’s not an answer."

"No. It isn’t. But it’s the most honest thing I can give you, Nadia. The position has reasons for taking it and reasons for not taking it. The reasons cancel against each other in different ways for different people. For me they cancelled toward declining. For you, evidently, they cancel the same way. I don’t think you’re wrong. I’m not in a position to be sure."

"Thank you, Priya."

"I’ll tell Weller for you, if you want me to, when he asks."

"No. I’ll tell him myself. I’ll write to him this afternoon."

"All right."

They finish their lunch and walk back to the floor together.

At three in the afternoon something arrives in her ordinary queue that is not from her usual collection.

It is an item routed from a different theater. Cyprus. Specifically, a voice intercept from a phone call placed on a Cypriot mobile network earlier this morning. The call is to a number in Lebanon. The Lebanese number is not flagged. The Cypriot caller is the subject.

The call is in Arabic. The Cypriot caller is speaking with a Lebanese woman whose name is, in the metadata, *Salma S., associate of priority three subject Rania M.*

Nadia listens.

Salma is asking the Cypriot caller, who is a man, whether the meeting is still on. The Cypriot caller says he does not think so. The Cypriot caller says there has been an incident. He does not say what kind of incident. He says they should wait for further information before assuming the schedule will hold.

Salma asks: an incident with whom.

The Cypriot caller says: with the road.

The call ends.

Nadia plays the audio again.

With the road. The phrase in that dialect can mean either a literal road, an accident on a road, or a closure of a road by military action. It can also be a euphemism, in certain contexts, for a person who travels regularly. *The road* meaning *the courier,* or *the messenger,* or *the one who comes and goes.*

She does not know which sense the Cypriot caller intended.

She does not know whether the meeting in the village has been canceled because the road is impassable, or because someone has been hurt, or because something has happened that has nothing to do with the priority three subjects at all.

She listens a third time. She makes a note in the review field. She types: *Translation: Cypriot speaker indicates that a meeting may be canceled or postponed due to an unspecified incident referred to as "with the road." Phrase ambiguous between literal infrastructure issue and metaphorical reference to a courier or messenger. No clear threat content in this audio. Recommend further collection before assessment.*

She approves.

She closes the item.

She sits very still at her desk.

She does not know what has happened. She knows only that something has happened, and that the meeting that was scheduled for noon has not, apparently, taken place at noon, or has taken place differently, or the people who were going to be there have

decided not to go, or some of them have decided not to go, or one of them is no longer able to go.

She does not know if Rania is alive.

She does not know if Rania was in the village.

She does not know if the system acted, or if something else acted, or if nothing acted and the cancellation is the ordinary cancellation of a meeting in a country where ordinary plans are constantly being disrupted by the war.

She has, in front of her, a queue of items to review. She continues to review them. She does this for the next two hours.

At five o'clock another item lands.

It is not Rania. It is a different intercept, from southern Lebanon, time-stamped one hour ago. Two men are talking. One asks the other about a woman whose name is not given. The second man says she is *fine, but she did not come.* The first man says she is *lucky.* The second man says she is *not lucky, she is careful.* The conversation ends.

The model has flagged the intercept at confidence 0.71. Below the model's threshold for action. The item is sitting in the queue for routine review.

The metadata associates the second speaker, by phone number, with a priority three subject's known associates list.

Nadia listens to the audio twice.

She types in the review field.

Translation: Two unidentified male speakers discussing an unnamed woman. Speaker 1 inquires after her status. Speaker 2 reports she is well but did not come, presumably to a meeting or gathering. Speaker 1 characterizes her as fortunate. Speaker 2 corrects to "careful." No further context available from this audio. The exchange suggests the

woman in question avoided a situation in which she might have been at risk, but the nature of the risk is not specified in this audio.

She approves.

She does not write more. She does not draw the connection. The system can draw it or not. She has done her job.

She closes the item.

At six she signs out.

In the car on the way home she opens her phone again and scans the news.

There is a small report on one of the Lebanese sites. A vehicle was struck by a drone earlier in the day on a road in the south. The vehicle was destroyed. The two occupants are dead. The Israeli military has not claimed the strike. The names of the dead have not been released. The location is described only as *a road south of the Litani.*

She reads the report twice. She does not know whether it has anything to do with the meeting in the village. She does not know whether the road in question is the road Rania would have taken, if she had been going. She does not know whether the people in the vehicle were going to the meeting, or coming from another meeting, or driving for unrelated reasons.

She knows only that something happened on a road today. That the meeting Salma had scheduled was canceled or postponed. That a woman has reportedly *not come* and is *careful.*

She does not let herself believe that the woman in the second intercept is Rania. She does not let herself believe that she is not. She holds the question in the part of her mind she has learned to

hold questions in, the part that does not require an answer in order to keep functioning.

In the apartment she does not turn on the lights. She stands in the kitchen for a long time, drinks a glass of water, opens her laptop. She does not write to Ingrid. Instead, she opens her email and begins a message to Robert Weller. She writes:

Robert. Thank you again for the meeting last week and for the offer of the senior QA lead position. After serious consideration, I want to let you know that I will not be accepting the position. I am grateful for the consideration and for the transparency you showed me about the program. I plan to continue in my current role through the rollout, and to take the severance package after that. I would be glad to discuss any aspects of the transition that would be helpful as you finalize the team. Please let me know if you would like to schedule time. Best regards, Nadia.

She reads what she has written.

She sends it.

She closes the laptop.

Nadia sits at the desk in the dark for a long time.

She does not know what happened today. She does not know whether her corrections in the queue mattered, whether the system acted on Rania or did not, whether the road incident has anything to do with anything she has been involved in, whether she has done a good thing today or only a small thing or perhaps not even a small thing, only a thing in the shape of one.

She knows she has declined the offer.

She knows she has taught Yusuf for ninety minutes this morning, and that he listened.

She knows that somewhere in the south, on a road or in a village or in a house she has never seen, a woman she has not spoken to in twenty-three years is, possibly, still alive, and may have been all along.

She does not know if it is enough.

She does not believe that *enough* is the right measure.

She gets up, goes to the kitchen and makes herself something to eat.

She eats standing at the counter.

She does not write in the notebook tonight. The notebook is for things that need to be remembered. Today is not yet legible enough to remember. The mentor would have said: *you cannot judge the dawn before it has gone.* She is going to wait. She is going to let the day finish.

At ten she lies down in bed.

In the dark she thinks about the line from al-Mutanabbi her mentor had written about. *The winds blow against what the ships desire.* She is on the ship. She is sailing.

She sleeps.

Chapter 12
The Generalife

ما أَنتَ بِالحَكَمِ المُرضي إِذا حَكَمَ وَلا الأَصيلِ وَلا ذي الرَأيِ وَالجَدَلِ

No eres juez en quien se confía cuando juzgas, ni hombre de raíz, ni de razón, ni de debate.

You are not a trustworthy judge when you judge, nor a man of root, nor of reason, nor of argument.

—al-Mutanabbi, 10th c.

The translator kept this couplet pinned above his desk for years, with a single word added in his hand at the bottom of the sheet: *recordatorio*. A reminder. He did not say to whom.

Nadia wakes on Thursday at the ordinary time, six in the morning. The apartment is gray with the early light. Nadia lies in bed for a few minutes. The day is Thursday, ordinary and impossible at once. She does not know yet what happened yesterday. She may not find out today either.

On the small bookshelf by the kitchen, on the second shelf, is a framed photograph that has been there since she moved in and that she has not touched in months. Ben in Garmisch in 2014. He is in civilian clothes. He is laughing at something the photographer, who was not her, must have said. The light on his face is the specific Bavarian light of late winter, low and sharp. She does not remember which trip this photograph is from. She has never been able to remember.

She looks at it for a long time, with her coffee.

Then she sets the cup down on the counter, walks to the bookshelf, picks up the photograph, and brings it back to the table. She sits at the table and looks at the photograph properly.

The morning bends.

It is April, 2010. She is twenty-two. The Alhambra at this season is full of school groups, and she has scheduled the visit for three in the afternoon, when the worst of the morning crowds have left and the heat in the gardens is bearable.

She is annoyed.

She is annoyed because she had been planning to spend the afternoon in the library, working on a chapter she has been struggling with, and because the mentor had called her at ten that morning and asked her, with the small tone he used when he was not really asking, whether she would mind taking an American visitor around the Alhambra. The brother of a colleague. The son of a friend of a friend. *He is a serious young man, Nadia. I do not have time today and I do not know him and I cannot in conscience send him alone. You will be perfect. You know the place better than I do. He arrives at his hotel at one. The reservation is for three. I will email you his details.*

She said yes. She said yes because it is impossible to say no to him. She also said yes because she recognized, in the way he asked, that he was doing her a small favor she did not yet understand. He made this clear by not making it clear, which was his way.

She meets the American at a café near the cathedral at two. She has agreed to this meeting place because the hotel where he is staying is in the lower city and the walk up to the Alhambra is steep and tourists who have flown in that morning are usually already lost. She will collect him at the café. They will walk up together. She will not be his guide. She will be his colleague's brother's friend doing a favor.

She arrives five minutes early. She takes a table at the back, where she can see the door, and orders a coffee. She is carrying a small leather bag with a notebook and a guidebook. She has worn a linen dress because it is hot, and a hat because the sun in the gardens will be bright. She does not remember now what shoes she had on, but she remembers everything else very clearly.

He comes in at three minutes past two.

He is in jeans and a white shirt, with a small backpack over one shoulder. He is taller than she expected, which means the mentor's email did not describe him at all. He has dark hair, slightly long, and a face that is younger than the impression his stride gives. He is looking around the café with the careful, slightly disoriented look of a man who has flown in that morning and has not yet adjusted to the time. She watches him for two seconds before he sees her. She files this. She will tell him later, when she knows him better, that she had two seconds to decide what she thought of him before he knew she was looking, and that those two seconds gave her an advantage she never afterward surrendered.

He sees her. He walks over.

"Miss Saliba?"

No one has called her Miss Saliba in two years.

"Yes. Lieutenant Whitman?"

"Ben, please."

"Nadia."

He sits across from her, orders a coffee and apologizes for being five minutes late, which he is not. He tells her he walked from his hotel and took a wrong turn near the cathedral.

"It is fine," she says. "We have time."

He thanks her for doing this. He says he understands she had to rearrange her afternoon. He says he is grateful and that he hopes the favor is not a burden. He says all of this in a way that is neither overdone nor perfunctory, and she registers, with a small private surprise, that he is a man who has been raised to thank people properly.

She was prepared to dislike him and was going to give him the standard tour, the one she gives visiting cousins and lost graduate students from other departments, the one that takes ninety minutes and ends at the entrance to the Generalife. She was ready to drop him there with directions to a taxi and to walk back to the library with three hours of her afternoon still salvageable.

But now, having watched him for only ten minutes, Nadia is recalibrating.

They walk up to the Alhambra. They take the long way through the Albayzín, because she has decided he should see it. He asks her, twice, whether she has time for the longer route. She tells him, both times, that she does. They walk past the Mirador de San Nicolás, where the view of the Alhambra against the Sierra Nevada opens out in the way it has always opened out, and she watches him stop and look. He does not say anything for a long time. He

stands at the railing with both hands resting on it. She has time, while he is looking, to decide that she likes him.

When he speaks he says, "Why has nobody ever told me that Granada is so beautiful?"

"Most pictures are taken at sunset. The pictures are wrong."

"They are."

"This morning light is better, but you have to be here at seven in the morning, and most people are not."

"What does it look like at seven?"

"The walls go pink. The Sierra Nevada is still in shadow. The whole thing looks like it is rising out of the night."

"You have seen this?"

"I have seen this."

"More than once?"

"Many times."

He looks at her. He looks back at the Alhambra and says, "I would like to come back at seven someday."

She nods. She does not respond more than this. She does not know him well enough yet to make an offer that would commit her to walking up here with him at six-forty in the morning. She files it as a wish.

They walk down through the Albayzín, then up the slope to the Alhambra entrance. She presents the tickets. They go in. They walk the standard route.

He is a good visitor. He listens. He asks questions that are not the questions most tourists ask. He does not photograph anything. He does

not check his phone. When she explains a detail he does not understand, he says so, and asks her to explain it again. When she explains a detail he does understand, he nods and does not pretend he already knew it. He is a man who does not need to flaunt his intelligence. She files this also.

In the Court of the Lions he asks her about the hydraulics. She tells him what she knows, which is more than most guides. He asks a follow-up question that she cannot answer, which is about pressure differentials in the original twelfth-century system, and she tells him she does not know. He says that is fine. He says he likes that she does not pretend.

They move on.

In the Generalife they slow down. The gardens at this hour are quiet, most of the school groups gone, the late afternoon light coming down through the cypresses. She walks him past the long pool with the arched water jets, and the staircase with the water running along its banisters, and the small upper garden where the orange trees stand in their old arrangement.

They stop at the upper terrace. He puts his hands on the stone wall and looks down over the lower garden and over the slope of the hill toward the Albayzín on the opposite ridge.

He is quiet for a long time.

She lets him be quiet. She has learned, walking with him for two hours, that his silences are not awkward. They are silences of attention.

When he speaks he does not look at her. He says, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Yes."

"What did it feel like to pray in a room that was later consecrated as a church."

She does not understand the question for a half-second. Then she understands it. He is asking about the small chapel inside the Alhambra, a former mosque that the Christians had rebuilt after 1492. He had stood in it for several minutes earlier in the afternoon, and she had assumed he was being polite. He was not being polite. He had been thinking about this the whole time.

She thinks about how to answer.

"It would feel," she says slowly, "like the room had been told it was no longer what it had been. The room would not believe it. The room would continue to know."

He is looking at her now.

"You are not a Muslim," he says.

"No."

"But you say *the room would continue to know.*"

"The room would. The architecture is older than the dispensation. The geometry of a Moorish prayer space is built around a particular orientation, toward a particular direction, for a particular purpose. You can put pews in it. You can put an altar against the qibla wall. The room will continue to know what it was built for. The people in the room may not know. The room will."

He nods. He looks back at the gardens.

"I’m going to be deployed in October," he says. "I don’t know yet exactly where. But I’m thinking about the room you just described. I’m thinking about how it knows."

She does not say anything. She is letting him say what he is saying.

"I’m going into a region," he says, "that has been told for a long time that it is something other than what it has been before. By many people. By many systems of belief. By many empires. I am not going there to tell them that. I am going there as a Civil Affairs officer, which means my job is supposed to be to understand what it has been and to listen to what it is. But I’m going there as part of an apparatus that is also telling them what is."

"Yes."

"I’ve been thinking about this for some time. I hadn’t been able to phrase it before just now. You phrased it for me."

"I didn’t phrase it."

"You did. The *room* knows. Empires come and go. But the room *knows*."

She is looking at him.

"Nadia," he says. And he uses her name for the first time without the *Miss Saliba* preface, and the use of her name lands in her chest in a way she was not expecting.

"Yes."

"Will you have dinner with me tonight."

"Yes."

She answered without even thinking about it. She has answered correctly. Her mentor will be entertained, when she tells him later, about how quickly she answered. He will not, characteristically, make a comment. He will only raise an eyebrow when she gets to the part of the story where she said yes without thinking.

They have dinner that evening at a small restaurant in the Albayzín, and he extends his stay in Granada by forty-eight hours, and at the end of the forty-eight hours he flies back to his posting

in Germany, and she goes back to the library, and a week later he writes her a letter, on paper, in handwriting that is the careful handwriting of an officer who has been taught to write legibly, and she writes back, and a month later he comes back to Granada for a weekend, and she meets him at the same café, and this time he is not five minutes late.

The mentor watches all of this happen with the small silence of a man who has decided not to interfere. When she finally tells him, that summer, that she is in love with the American, he nods. He does not congratulate her. He does not warn her. He says only, *Nadia, querida. He is a good man. He is also a soldier. Both of those things are true. You will have to live with both of them.*

She lives with both of them. They are both true. He is killed in Kabul in August of 2021, in the chaos of the evacuation, in a way that is never quite explained to her, a folded flag is handed to her at Arlington in November, and she lives the next four years carrying both parts of him, the good man and the soldier, along with her mentor's warning that she would have to.

Nadia is sitting at her kitchen table in Doha. The photograph is in her hand. The coffee in the cup has gone cold.

She is crying.

She has not cried in months. She has not cried, properly, in over a year. She is crying now in the quiet, controlled way of a woman who does not want to wake the building, although there is no one in the apartment to wake. She lets it happen. She does not fight it. She does not attempt to think about why, today, the tears have arrived. She knows why. She is not going to itemize it.

She cries for perhaps three minutes.

Then she stops.

Nadia wipes her face with the back of her hand, gets up and washes her face at the kitchen sink. She returns to the table and picks up the photograph, looks at it once more, and puts it back on the second shelf of the bookshelf, in the position it has been in for four years.

She finishes her coffee and glances at the clock. In fifteen minutes the car will be here.

She picks up her phone, opens her messages and writes to Ingrid: *I had a cry this morning, the first one in a long time. I am going to be all right today. I wanted you to know.*

She sends it, picks up her bag, goes to the door and looks back at the apartment.

The room knows what it is for.

She does not know yet, this morning, whether Rania is alive. She does not know what is going to happen at the office today. She does not know what Weller will say to her response. She does not know what Yusuf will ask her. She does not know what the system will do next.

She only knows that she has had her cry, finally.

Chapter 13
Two Men on a Road

مَن قَتَلَ نَفساً بِغَيرِ نَفسٍ أَو فَسادٍ في الأَرضِ فَكَأَنَّما قَتَلَ النّاسَ جَميعاً

Quien mata a una persona, salvo en justa retribución o por corrupción en la tierra, es como si hubiera matado a toda la humanidad.

Whoever kills a person, except in just retribution or for corruption in the land, it is as though he has killed all of humanity.

—Qur'an 5:32

The translator noted: *the verse is often quoted in defense of mercy. The Hebrew Mishnah contains a similar formulation. Both traditions understood, in their respective ways, that a single life* is *the world. Both traditions have, in practice, struggled to live up to what they wrote.*

Nadia arrives at the compound at seven-fifteen, which is later than usual. The car was late. The new driver, who is not Bishal and whose

name she has not asked, apologized in careful English. There was a checkpoint on the route they usually take. She told him it was fine.

Her queue shows 2,140 items. She does not look at the number. She simply opens the first item, begins and works for an hour without stopping. Her concentration is better than she expected, the way concentration sometimes sharpens in the morning after a hard cry, as if the body has been emptied of something and is grateful for a task. She corrects what needs correcting. She approves what does not.

At eight-thirty she opens the priority three queue.

Three new Rania-tagged items have arrived overnight. The most recent is two hours old.

She opens it.

It is a voice call. Rania to Salma. Forty-five seconds.

Rania is asking Salma whether she has heard. Salma says yes, she has heard. Rania asks whether the family has been notified. Salma says yes. Rania asks how the wife is. Salma says she is not well. Rania says she will go to the wife this evening. Salma says that would be good. Salma says it is too dangerous to come tonight. Rania says she will come anyway. Salma says she knew Rania would say that. The call ends.

The model has flagged the call at confidence 0.83 as relevant to coordination of associated subjects. The model does not understand what it has heard. The model has heard the words *go to*, and *tonight*, and *come anyway*, and has assembled them into a pattern.

Nadia listens to the call again.

She types in the review field.

Translation: Speaker A inquires whether Speaker B has received information about a recent event. Speaker B confirms. Speaker A asks about the welfare of an unnamed wife. Speaker B reports the wife is not well. Speaker A states intention to visit the wife in the evening despite Speaker B's caution about danger. Conversation pattern is consistent with two close friends responding to news of a male relative's death by planning a condolence visit. The phrase "the family has been notified" indicates that an official notification has been made to a family in connection with a death. No operational content. Recommend redirection of this item from priority three pool to humanitarian context tracking.

She approves and closes the priority three queue.

Nadia now knows several things that she did not know an hour ago. She knows that Rania is alive. She knows Rania was not the one in the vehicle on the road south of the Litani. She knows the people in the vehicle are dead. She knows one of them was a man whose wife Salma considers part of the network of women Rania belongs to. She knows the wife is not well, which is the Lebanese way of saying that the wife has been informed and has collapsed under the information. She knows Rania will go to her tonight, despite the danger, because that is what one does for a woman whose husband has been killed by a drone the day before.

She knows, also, that the man in the vehicle was the man the system was tracking. The system did its work. The strike was successful by the system's measure. A name was on a list. The list had been distilled from inputs that included the comment she attached to a file. The aggregate of all of these, fed through the computer’s algorithm, produced a confidence score that passed a threshold and moved a name from one list to another.

Rania is alive because Rania was not in the vehicle. The reasons for Rania not being in the vehicle are not knowable from this where Nadia

sits. Perhaps Rania was running late. Perhaps the meeting in the village had been scheduled for a time after the man on the road would have arrived. Perhaps there was no connection at all between the meeting in the village and the man on the road, and Wednesday's events were the parallel productions of an apparatus that produces such events daily.

She does not know. She is allowed not to know.

She *does know* that a man is dead. She knows the man's wife is in a house somewhere in Lebanon, not well. She knows the wife had a name yesterday and has the same name today and will continue to have it after the news cycle has moved on. The system does not retain the wife's name. The system does not need it. The wife is what results, downstream, by the operation of the system. She is not in any database that anyone checks twice.

Nadia thinks about this. She does not let herself look away from it. She has learned, over the past week, that looking away is what the system does. The system looks at everything once and then never again. The corrections she has been writing are, among other things, an act of looking twice. She is not going to stop looking now, just because what she is seeing is what her own work has resulted in.

She returns to her regular queue and works through the morning.

At ten-thirty Yusuf comes by her pod. He has another audio file. This time, he has prepared a specific question about a phrase he has been unable to identify. They work for forty minutes. The phrase turns out to be a fragment of a lullaby, sung by a mother to a child, the model flagged it because the lullaby's melody happens to share intervals with a song the model has been trained to associate with a particular faction.

She points this out to Yusuf, and tells him: the model is hearing the music. The model is not hearing the words. The words are *the moon is on your forehead, my soul.* The mother is putting her child to sleep. The model is hearing the four ascending notes that begin the lullaby, which are also the four ascending notes that begin a song that men in a particular region sing at funerals. The model has read the music and has assembled a story.

Yusuf writes this down. He does not speak for a moment.

Then he says, "How many of these are there."

"How many what."

"How many lullabies is the system listening to?"

"I don’t know, Yusuf. The number isn’t knowable from here. I would guess that across the regions the system covers, it is hearing perhaps ten or fifteen thousand voice intercepts a day. Some unknown fraction of those involve domestic content the model cannot accurately classify. Lullabies. Arguments about money. Funeral arrangements. Marriage negotiations. The full range of what people say to each other in the privacy of their lives, which the system is not reading as private because the system hasn’t been built to acknowledge privacy."

"Most of those are flagged?"

"Most of those are flagged because the model has been trained to flag broadly. The reviewer queue is the filter. *We* are the filter. After the rollout, the filter changes."

"To what?"

"To no filter. The model passes its own outputs forward at confidence levels above thresholds that have been set by the customer. A small QA team samples a percentage of the output for compliance reporting. The samples are not the filter. The filter is the threshold."

He is writing.

"Nadia?"

"Yes?"

"This isn’t what I thought I was being hired to do."

"No?"

"I thought I was being hired to do the thing I’m doing now. Listening, correcting, flagging the misreadings."

"I know."

"But after the rollout, I’m being hired to sample compliance reports."

"You aren’t being hired to do anything after the rollout, Yusuf. The reviewer footprint is being reduced. You aren’t on the senior QA list. I don’t know if you’ve been told this yet. I’m telling you now."

He looks at her.

"Denise hasn’t told me anything specific," he says.

"She will. Soon. The senior QA leads are being named by May first. The reviewer terminations follow the leads."

"How do you know?"

"Because Weller offered me one of the senior QA positions last week. I declined it on Wednesday. I know the structure because he explained it to me. I’m telling you because you should know what’s coming so you can plan."

"Weller offered it to you?"

"Yes."

"And you declined?"

"Yes."

He is quiet for a long moment.

Then he says, "I'm sorry that I didn't know to ask the right questions sooner."

"You didn't have to know."

"I did, though. I think I did. I think I knew at some level but I didn't let myself ask."

She looks at him. He is being honest with himself in a way that is harder than the questions about the dialect, and she wants to honor it.

"Yusuf. You came to this work to do something you believed in. The system has changed underneath you. It isn't your fault that you didn't see it coming. Most of the people on this floor didn't see it coming, including people who have been in this work for over twenty years."

"Did you see it coming?"

"I saw it coming late. I started to see it about three months ago. I didn't completely understand the shape of what I was seeing until two weeks ago."

"Two weeks ago?"

"Yes."

"What changed two weeks ago?"

She hesitates. Then she says: "Something specific in the queue. I can't give you details. The general answer is that I understood that my reviews were being used to legitimate dispositions I didn't endorse. The specific answer is that I had a personal stake in a particular case that forced me to look more carefully at what the system was doing with my work."

He nods. He does not press for the specifics.

"What are you going to do," he asks.

"I’m going to finish my contract through the rollout. Then I’m going to take the severance and leave."

"What are you going to do after?"

"I don’t know. I haven’t let myself think about it yet."

"Are you going to write about this?"

"I don’t know, Yusuf."

"You should."

"Maybe. I haven’t decided."

He stands and gathers his pad.

"Thank you for telling me," he says. "I needed to know."

"I know you did."

Yusuf walks back to his pod. She watches him go and thinks: he is one more person on this floor who knows, now, what is coming. Whether the knowing helps him or only adds to his burdens, she cannot say.

At one in the afternoon Denise comes onto the floor and stops at Nadia's pod. She does not sit, only leans on the edge of the partition.

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"He got your email."

"All right."

"He isn’t going to push back. He wanted you to know that. He understands. He thanks you for the consideration."

"That is generous of him."

"He also wanted me to tell you that the offer remains open through Friday end of business. If you reconsider, the door is open. After that he will move to the next name on his list."

"I won’t reconsider."

"All right."

"Denise."

"Yes."

"Did you also turn it down."

Denise looks at her. Denise has not been asked this directly before. Denise considers her answer for a moment.

"He didn’t offer it to me, Nadia. I’m not a linguist. I’m management. The offer he made you is not a position I would be eligible for."

"That is not what I asked."

"No. It isn’t."

Denise pauses. Then she says, "He has offered me something else, but I haven’t decided about it yet. I’m telling you this because you’ve been honest with me, and I want to be honest with you. Whatever I decide, I’ll make sure you know before it’s announced."

"Thank you, Denise."

"You’re welcome."

Denise leaves. Nadia returns to her queue.

At six-fifteen she signs out. The car takes her home. The traffic is bad. The driver does not speak. The city through the window looks the same as it has looked all week.

In her apartment she doesn't turn on the lights. She stands in the kitchen for a long time, drinks a glass of water, doesn't eat.

She thinks about the dead man on the road.

She does not know his name. She does not know how old he was. She does not know whether he had children. She does not know what he was doing on that road yesterday morning, whether he was driving toward a meeting in the village or away from it or in some entirely separate direction, whether he was a man whose death the system has good reason to consider justified or whether he was a man whose death will be, ten years from now, listed by historians of this conflict among the deaths that should not have happened.

She knows only that he had a wife and that his wife, now a widow, is not well.

For the first time today, Nadia thinks about her own four years as a widow who was not well. She doesn't linger on the connection any further than this.

Nadia writes a single sentence in her notebook. In English. She writes:

A man died yesterday on a road in southern Lebanon. His wife is not well. I am part of the system that killed him. I am not going to pretend that I am not.

She closes the notebook and puts it back in the drawer.

She makes herself something simple to eat, eats standing at the counter and makes a point of not turning on the news. She has already read today's news. It was about a man and his wife and Nadia's personal involvement in their tragedy.

At nine she writes a short message to Ingrid.

The woman I told you about is alive. Other people died yesterday. I am all right. I am at the part of this where I have begun to understand what I am. I am going to keep working through the rollout. I will write more later in the week.

Ingrid replies within an hour. The reply is two sentences.

I am holding you in my mind. Write when you can.

Nadia reads it twice and closes her laptop.

Nadia goes to bed at ten-thirty. She does not pick up a book. She does not turn on the lamp. She lies in the dark for a long time before she sleeps.

Chapter 14
The Yellow Line

وَيَبني الزَمانُ بُيوتَنا ثُمَّ يَهدِمُها وَنَحنُ فيها

El tiempo construye nuestras casas, luego las derriba mientras estamos en ellas.

Time builds our houses, then tears them down while we are still inside them.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, undated

The translator noted in the margin: *the line is a complaint, but it is also a description. Houses are torn down. We are inside them. There is no part of the sentence that is rhetorical.*

The ceasefire is in its second week.

Nadia reads the news in the morning, standing at the kitchen counter with her coffee. She has resumed reading the news at the start of the day, though she does not know why. Perhaps because her cry on Thursday loosened something. Perhaps because she has decided that not knowing is no longer comfortable. The

information is there. It is going to enter her one way or another. Better that it enter through her own reading than through a phone call she did not expect.

The reports are consistent across the sources she trusts. Beit Lif is gone. Bint Jbeil is gone. Ayta ash-Shab is gone. The villages the Israeli military reached during the March offensive are now being deliberately demolished, methodically, building by building, by contractors paid by the building. The work continues even with the ceasefire. The Israeli government has named the policy. The defense minister has compared the work to what was done in Rafah and Beit Hanoun. The commanders quoted in the Israeli press are not hiding what they are doing. They are explaining it, proud of what they are doing.

She reads for fifteen minutes, finishes her coffee, and gets dressed for work.

In the car on the way to the compound she watches the city pass and she thinks about the word *flattened*. The word in English is brutal because it is plain. There is no gradient. A flattened building is not a damaged building. A flattened village is not a damaged village. The word names the completion of a process. After the flattening, there is no architecture to argue about. There is only the concrete, the rebar, the dust.

She thinks about her grandmother's house in the Chouf.

The Chouf is not in the area being demolished. The Chouf is further north. The Druze and Christian villages of the Chouf have not been systematically reduced in the way the Shia villages closer to the border have been. Her grandmother's house, if it still stands, probably still stands.

She does not know if it still stands. She has not asked. Her mother might know. Her mother has not volunteered the information. The

unspoken understanding between them, since the war began, is that they do not discuss the village.

She has not been to her grandmother's village in twenty-three years. The house may have been sold. It may have been passed to a cousin. It may have been left empty. It may be standing exactly as she remembers it, with the fig tree in the garden, with the stone terraces, with the silver light of the coastal mountains in late afternoon.

She does not know which it is. She has been able to live, for two decades, with the not-knowing. The not-knowing has been a kind of preservation. The house she remembers can continue to exist as long as she does not ask whether it still does.

But she is now living inside an apparatus that is razing villages with her professional adjacency, and the question of which architecture survives this period and which does not is no longer a question she can keep at the perimeter of her attention.

At the compound her queue is at 2,260 items. She does not register the number.

Nadia works through the morning. The intercepts she reviews this morning are different in character than they were a month ago. The voices are quieter, conversations shorter. People are saying less on the phone because there is less to say that is not bad news. A woman in Tyre asks her sister whether the cousin's body has been recovered. A man in the Bekaa tells his uncle that the school is closed and is not going to reopen. A woman near Saida tells someone that she does not know where her husband is. She had not known for three days.

Nadia reviews each item carefully. She corrects where corrections are needed and approves where they are not. The work is what it is.

At ten Yusuf comes by her pod. He has an audio file. They work together on it for an hour. The file is a voice call between two women, one older, one younger, in a dialect from a village that, Nadia realizes as she listens, is one of the villages that has been demolished. The call is from before the demolition. The system has held the call in its archive and is now surfacing it for review because of an analytic the system is running on associations.

The older woman in the call is asking the younger woman about a piece of furniture. A wooden chest. The older woman is saying the chest had belonged to her mother. The younger woman is saying she will try to retrieve it from the house when she next goes back.

The call is from three weeks ago. The younger woman has not gone back. The house is gone. The chest is in the rubble.

Nadia explains the dialect features to Yusuf. She does not explain the rest.

After Yusuf left, she sits at her desk for a long moment. She thinks about the chest.

At twelve-thirty Priya finds her in the courtyard.

"Nadia. Are you eating."

"Yes."

"You don’t look like you are eating."

"I’m eating, Priya."

"All right."

Priya sits down. She has brought two oranges, gives Nadia one of them.

They eat the oranges without speaking for a few minutes.

Then Priya says, "Have you decided where you’re going."

"After the rollout?"

"Yes."

"I haven’t decided."

"I have."

"Where."

"London. My brother’s there. His wife is ill, and he’s been asking me to come for over a year now. The severance gives me the runway."

"That sounds right for you."

"It does. I am surprised by how settled it feels. I thought I would be more torn."

"You’ve been in this work for a long time."

"Twenty-three years. I haven’t had a life apart from it, but I’m ready to find out what one looks like."

"I hope you find it."

"I will. The trick at my age is not to wait for it to look like what it would have looked like when I was thirty. The shape of my new life is going to be a different. I’m willing for it to be."

Nadia nods.

"What about you," Priya says.

"I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about Granada."

"Granada?"

"I studied there. My teacher is buried there. I haven’t been back in years."

"Is there something for you to do in Granada."

"I don’t know. It isn’t the going there that I’m thinking about. It’s just going somewhere that isn’t here, and isn’t Houston, and not the apartment my husband and I had in Germany. I’m thinking about going some place that isn’t full of someone I’ve lost."

"That makes sense."

"I’ll probably also go to Houston for a while. My mother is there, and she isn’t getting any younger. I haven’t been such a good daughter these past few years."

"You’ve been a daughter who was working through things."

"That is my mother's view, too."

Priya smiles at this, briefly.

"Nadia."

"Yes."

"Whatever you decide, don’t stay in Doha."

"I wasn’t planning to."

"Good."

They finish the oranges.

In the afternoon she opens an item that has been routed to her from the priority three queue. It is a voice call. Rania, but not to Salma. To another woman, whose name is not in the metadata. They are speaking briefly, perhaps for thirty seconds.

The other woman is asking Rania whether she has seen the photographs.

Rania says yes. She has seen them.

The other woman says: there is nothing left.

Rania says: there is the foundation. There is always a foundation.

The other woman says: that is not the same as a house.

Rania says: I know it is not. I am only saying what is left.

The call ends.

Nadia listens twice.

In the review field she writes: *Translation: Speakers are discussing photographic documentation of an unspecified location. Speaker B observes that "there is nothing left." Speaker A acknowledges and notes that "there is the foundation." The exchange is consistent with two women looking at images of a destroyed property, possibly a family home or a property of personal significance to one or both speakers. No operational content. Recommend redirection of this item from priority three pool.*

She approves, closes the item.

Nadia doesn’t know whose house Rania is talking about. She doesn’t know whether it is Rania's own house, or a relative's, or a friend's. She knows only that someone Rania knows had a house that has now been reduced to its foundation, and that Rania has seen the photographs, and that what Rania says about the foundation is the kind of thing a person says when she is trying to find any small thing to hold onto. *There is always a foundation.*

The phrase stays with her for the rest of the afternoon.

On the ride home she watches the city pass. The traffic is heavier than usual. The reinforced barriers around the southern access roads are still in place. A new construction crane has appeared near

the edge of West Bay, which she takes as a small sign that someone, somewhere, has decided that the city's life will continue.

In the apartment she does what she has done every evening this week. She does not turn on the lights. She stands in the kitchen. She drinks a glass of water.

Nadia picks up her phone and calls her mother.

It is mid-morning in Houston. Her mother answers on the first ring.

"Habibti."

"Mama."

"I was just thinking about you."

"I know."

"How."

"I don’t know how. I’m thinking about you. I’m calling. We are thinking about each other at the same time."

"This is what mothers and daughters do."

"Yes."

A small pause.

"Mama."

"Yes."

"I want to ask you something."

"Yes."

"The house. Tata's house. In the village."

Her mother is quiet for a moment.

"What do you want to know, habibti."

"Does it still stand."

Her mother sighs. The sigh travels across nine thousand miles and lands in Nadia's ear the way it would have landed if her mother had been in the next room.

"It still stands, Nadia. It has not been hit. The Chouf has not been hit the way the south has been. Your cousin Najwa was there in February. The roof needs work. The garden has been let go. But the house is still there."

"The fig tree."

"The fig tree is still there. Najwa sent me a photograph. I will send it to you tonight."

"Thank you, Mama."

"Why are you asking now."

"Because I’m inside something at work that’s made me think about the houses that are being torn down. I’ve been not asking about Tata's house for all these years. But I realized this morning that I haven’t been asking because I didn’t want to know if it had been touched. I decided I needed to ask."

"And now you know."

"And now I know."

"Habibti."

"Yes."

"You should come home."

"I’m going to. I’m working here through to the end of May. After that, I’m going to come."

"For how long."

"I don’t know yet. For a while. Then I think I’m going to go to Granada for a while."

"Granada?"

"Yes."

"Why Granada?"

"Because *he* is buried there."

Her mother is quiet.

"All right, habibti."

"All right."

"I’ll send you the photograph."

"Thank you."

"I love you, Nadia."

"I love you, too, Mama."

They hang up.

The photograph arrives twenty minutes later. It is dated February. The light is the specific cold winter light of the Lebanese mountains, low and white. The house is standing. The roof has tiles missing on one side. The walls are the same walls she remembers, white stone with the deep blue painted shutters that her grandmother had insisted on, against everyone's advice, in 1988. The fig tree is in the foreground, leafless in the photograph because it is February, but visibly the same tree. The lower branches are at the same height she remembers them. The branch she and Rania had used as a seat is still there.

Nadia looks at the photograph for a long time.

She does not cry. The cry was Thursday. Today is something else. She is looking at a thing that exists, that has not been taken, that is still

there to go back to. She is looking at a piece of architecture that still knows what it is for.

She saves the photograph to her phone.

Nadia makes herself something simple to eat. She eats at the table tonight, for the second time this month. She has decided, sitting down, that the standing was a habit she has now spent four years with, and that today is a day on which it can end.

After dinner she opens her notebook. She writes, in pencil, in English:

The house still stands. The fig tree is still there. There is more than just a foundation, but there is always a foundation.

She closes the notebook. She puts it in the drawer. At ten, she gets into bed. She lies there for a few minutes looking at the ceiling.

Somewhere in southern Lebanon tonight a contractor is being paid by-the-building to destroy them. Somewhere a woman is looking at photographs of a place that is no longer a place. Somewhere a man is sitting in a tent that has been put up for the displaced and is trying to decide whether to tell his children that the house they hope to go back to is no longer there.

Nadia is in a high-rise apartment in Doha. The fig tree in her grandmother's garden is leafless but standing. The man on the road who was killed last week is buried by now. His wife is somewhere doing what wives of men killed by drones do, which is to continue, because there is nothing else to do.

Chapter 15
A Saturday in May

أَيَّتُها الَمدينَةُ النائِمَةُ أَيُقَظُ النائِمونَ في صَدرِكِ أَم يَسهَرونَ مَعَ المَوتِ

Oh ciudad dormida, ¿despiertan los que duermen en tu pecho, o velan con la muerte?

Sleeping city, do those who sleep in your breast wake, or do they keep vigil with death?

—Anonymous, Andalusian, probably 11th c.

The Translator noted: *the city is asked a question it cannot answer. The poet does not insist. He understands that some questions are addressed to a place rather than expecting a reply.*

Nadia wakes on Saturday at six-thirty, which is later than she has woken on any morning in two weeks. The apartment is bright. The sun has come up while she was sleeping.

She lies in bed for a few minutes. She is not anxious. She is not eager. She is rested, which is a state she has not been in for so long that she does not immediately recognize it.

She gets up, makes coffee and sits at the table to drink it. The sitting is becoming, this week, less of an effort.

She reads the news.

Nine people were killed in southern Lebanon yesterday. Three civil defense workers were among them. Houses were flattened in three villages whose names she reads without looking them up. The names mean nothing to her specifically, which is the point. She has reached a state of mind in which the names accumulate without her being able to assign each one a memory or a face. She used to know each village she read about. Now she reads them as a litany.

A new round of displacement orders has been issued for eight villages. The orders give residents twenty-four hours to leave. Lebanese officials are calling on the international community to intervene. The Israeli chief of staff has stated, on the record, that there is no ceasefire. The American president is being asked, by Israel, for permission to expand the campaign in mid-May if diplomacy does not produce a deal.

She reads all of this in twenty minutes, finishes her coffee, and decides she is not going to spend her day off in the apartment.

Nadia dresses in light clothes. She wears a sun hat she has not worn in months. She takes a small canvas bag with a book, a bottle of water, and her phone. She does not take her work badge. She has been carrying it on weekends without thinking. Today, she leaves it on the entry table.

She does not call for a car. She walks to the corner and waits for a taxi. The first one to come by stops. The driver is South Asian, probably Indian. She gets in.

"Souq Waqif, please."

"Yes, madam."

The taxi takes the inland route. She watches the city pass. The morning is bright and not yet hot. The sky is the specific Gulf May sky, pale and high. The streets are quieter than weekdays but not empty. A family is walking together along the corniche, the children running ahead, the parents calling them back without much conviction. A woman in an abaya is buying flowers from a small stand. Two young men are arguing about something on the sidewalk in front of a coffee shop, both laughing.

The taxi drops her at the edge of the souq. She pays,thanks the driver and walks in.

The Souq Waqif on a Saturday morning is the souq Doha shows itself when it remembers what it is. The smell of cardamom and coffee from one stall, of saffron and dried lemons from the next. The narrow lanes. The stone walls. The wooden beams of restored ceilings. She has been here many times, with Ben in the early years before the war began, alone since she returned to the region in November. She knows where she is going.

Nadia walks slowly and lets the souq be what it is. She passes the falconry shops, the spice merchants, the textile sellers, the vendors of small brass coffee pots that are made in Pakistan and sold to tourists as if they were Qatari. The vendors recognize that she is not a tourist and do not call out to her. She is grateful for this courtesy.

She stops at a small shop she has visited before, run by a Yemeni man whose name she does not know. He sells incense, and small ornamental boxes, and a particular kind of woven palm-fiber basket that comes from a single village in Hadhramaut and that is not made anywhere else. She has bought baskets from him three times. He nods to her when she comes in. He goes back to what he was doing, which is unpacking a small crate of new arrivals, and lets her look.

She looks. The baskets are good as always. She picks one up, a flat round one of the kind women in his village use to serve bread, and she runs her fingers around the edge. The weave is tight. The palm fiber has the slight roughness that is the mark of the genuine article.

"How much," she asks, in Arabic.

He names a price. She knows the price he is naming is not the tourist price. It is the price he gives to the people he respects.

"I will take it."

He wraps it in brown paper. They do not negotiate. As he wraps it she asks him, in Arabic, "How is your family."

He pauses for a moment over the wrapping. Then he resumes. "They are well. Their village is far from the fighting."

"I am glad."

"Yours?"

"I have a mother in America. I have a friend in Lebanon. The mother is well. The friend, I do not know."

He nods. He hands her the wrapped basket.

"It is a hard time," he says.

"Yes."

"In hard times, Allah teaches us patience."

"He does."

"Go in peace, sister."

"And you."

She walks out of the shop with the basket under her arm. The exchange has cost her perhaps two minutes. She is not sure why it

has settled something in her, but it has. The Yemeni man has not asked her any of the questions a stranger could have asked. He has not pressed her on the friend in Lebanon. He has not asked what she does. He has spoken to her as one adult addresses another in a hard time, with the formal courtesies that are a form of mercy.

She thinks, walking back through the souq with her new basket, that she has not been spoken to like this by a stranger in months. The contractor compound and the apartment building and the cars do not produce this kind of exchange. The souq does. There are still places in the world where adults speak to one another this way.

She has lunch at a small restaurant at the edge of the souq. She sits at a table near the window, orders mezze and a glass of mint tea. She eats slowly. She reads the book she has brought, which is a novel she has been carrying for three months without finishing, and which she now finds she can read for thirty minutes without thinking about Rania, or Yusuf, or Weller, or the queue.

The restaurant is half-full. A Qatari family is at the table next to hers, three generations, the children reading the menu aloud to the grandmother in a way that is half show and half affection. An older European couple is at another table, talking quietly about an exhibition they have recently seen. A young woman alone, perhaps a journalist, perhaps a student, is writing in a notebook with the focused expression of a person who has come to the right city for whatever she is working on.

Nadia eats. She reads. She lets the room be what it is.

The waiter is attentive and unobtrusive. When she has finished he asks, in English, whether she would like dessert. She says yes. He recommends something she has not tried before. She accepts. It arrives, it is good, and she eats it slowly.

When she pays she leaves a generous tip and the waiter, recognizing her courtesy, says *shukran* rather than thank you. She replies *afwan*, and they nod to each other, and she leaves.

In the afternoon she walks to the Museum of Islamic Art.

The walk takes thirty minutes. The day has warmed. She is glad of the hat. She passes families and couples and a few small groups of young men. The corniche along the waterfront is more populated than it was at dawn three weeks ago when she passed this way for the first time as a person on foot, rather than a passenger.

She has been to this museum once before, with Ben in 2017 when he was on leave between postings. They spent four wonderful days seeing Doha together. She remembers the way the museum building catches the light. She remembers the specific room he had liked best. She does not go to that room first. She lets herself wander.

She spends an hour in the galleries. The collection holds her attention more than she had expected. Calligraphy from twelfth-century Iran. Ceramics from Andalusia, which she pauses in front of, longer than she pauses in front of anything else. A small inlaid box from Damascus that bears, on its inner lid, a verse in a hand she can almost read.

She reaches the room Ben had liked, stands at the threshold. Nadia barely allows herself to look in. She does not go in. She decides, today, that she will save it. She will go in next time.

She leaves the museum at four and takes a taxi back to her building.

In the apartment she puts the basket on the counter. It looks correct there. She had been buying it without quite knowing what she was

buying it for. Now she sees that she was buying it for a kitchen counter in Doha and, eventually, for whatever counter comes after Doha.

She thinks about Bishal.

Nadia has not let herself think about him properly. He has been gone for nearly a month. In the original message he said one week. The week then became two, and then three. She has stopped asking the new drivers about him. They do not know. They are paid by a different agency than he was.

She wonders where he is. She wonders whether he went home to Kathmandu. She wonders whether he is well. She wonders whether his daughter has finished her pharmacy program. She wonders whether something has happened to him that she is never going to know about.

She has no way to find out. She has no number for him. She does not know his last name. She had registered him as Bishal in her phone, and his phone is a company phone. The contract for the phone routes through the same agency that no longer employs him. If she asked the agency, she would be filing a record that included her name and his, and she does not know what such a record would mean for either of them. She has decided, sitting on the couch in the late afternoon light, that she is not going to ask.

She is going to carry him as one of the people she has known in this period whose fates she will never know. The man on the road last week was the first. Bishal is the second. There will probably be others.

It is not easy to carry them in her mind. She does not know if the carrying is enough. She knows it is all she can do.

In the evening she eats simply, at the table. She reads more of the novel. She does not turn on the news.

Then she sends Ingrid a brief note.

Ingrid. I had a good day. I went to the souq and bought a basket. I had lunch at a restaurant and read for thirty minutes without thinking about anything difficult. I went to the museum. The day was a small grace. I wanted to tell you.

Ingrid replies before Nadia has closed her laptop.

A basket, a lunch, a museum. This is the right way to spend a Saturday. I am glad. Jonas is making something Italian. Our daughter is on the phone with a boy. The world contains all of these things at once. Do not forget this.

Nadia reads the message twice. She closes the laptop.

The world contains all of these things at once. The strikes in southern Lebanon. The displacement orders. The Yemeni man wrapping a basket in brown paper. The waiter who said *shukran.* The Qatari grandmother reading a menu with her grandchildren. The Italian dinner Jonas is cooking. The boy the daughter is on the phone with. The man on the road who is buried by now. The basket on the counter.

She does not pick the notebook up tonight.

She picks up the basket and looks at it instead.

She thinks about her grandmother's house. The fig tree. The deep blue shutters. The foundation. There is always the foundation. There is also, sometimes, a basket on a counter that was not there yesterday.

Chapter 16
After

قَد رَحَلَ الناسُ وَالأَنوارُ ساطِعَةٌ فَلا تَظُنَّ بِأَنَّ الدارَ مَسكونَةٌ

La gente se ha marchado y las luces aún brillan, no creas que la casa está habitada.

The people have left and the lights are still burning. Do not suppose that the house is inhabited.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, undated.

Translator noted: *the deception of a lit window is one of the oldest deceptions. The poet does not say who is being deceived. He may mean us. He may mean himself.*

The rollout went live ten days ago. May 19, on schedule, at six in the morning Doha time, which was midnight in Washington.

She had been on the floor at six. They had all been on the floor at six. Weller even flew in for the occasion. Denise brought pastries. There had been a brief speech, which Weller delivered standing in front of a screen that showed the model's first hour of operation at scale, throughput metrics rising in real time. He thanked the team. He

thanked the linguists by name. He thanked Nadia by name. He used the word *historic, and h*e had used the word *transition.*

Nadia had stood at the edge of the group.

After the speech the team had returned to their workstations. The queue was still there. The model's outputs still needed sampling. The work that had been review work yesterday was now QA sampling work, and the people doing it were the four linguists Weller had named to the new structure. Yusuf was not among them. Priya was not among them. Nadia was not among them.

The fourteen of them who had not been retained were given through the end of May to finish out their contracts. They were not reviewing anymore. They were working through the last items in the legacy queue, which the system was no longer routing to. They were closing it out. The desks they sat at had begun, in the days since, to look temporary in a way they had not looked the week before, although nothing physical had changed.

This morning is Thursday, May 28. Iranian officials are in Doha. They have been here since yesterday. They are staying in a hotel in West Bay, perhaps in one of the towers Nadia can see from her balcony. The negotiations are being conducted at the Qatari foreign ministry. The diplomatic security around the city is tight. The roads near the ministry are closed. The compound is operating at high tempo.

Last night the US struck Iranian boats in the Strait of Hormuz. The IRGC promised retaliation. Two hours ago, a missile from Iran reached Kuwait. The target was a US base. The damage assessment is not yet public. The talks in Doha are continuing as if the strikes were happening in a different region, which they are not, because the region is one region.

Nadia reads the news standing at her kitchen counter. She does not sit this morning. The progress she had been making on the sitting has been interrupted by the past ten days, which have asked things of her body that the sitting cannot accommodate.

Nadia finishes her coffee.

She dresses for what will most likely be her last week at the compound, depending on how the contractor decides to manage the end-of-month departures. She wears the gray skirt and the cream blouse again. She has begun to wear specific clothes for specific kinds of days, the way her mother used to. She has noticed this and decided not to fight it.

The car is waiting at six-forty.

At the compound the floor has the particular quality of a workspace that is being decommissioned without being officially decommissioned. Workstations that belonged to linguists who have already left are still there but empty, their monitors dark, their chairs pushed in. The four retained linguists sit at the center of the floor in a new pod arrangement that was installed over the weekend. The rest of the desks form an outer ring that has begun to feel ceremonial, like the seating in a courtroom after the trial is over and only the bailiffs remain.

Nadia signs in at her terminal. The system greets her with a message it did not display before the rollout. *Good morning, Nadia. Your account is in transition status. Items remaining in your legacy review queue: 47.*

Forty-seven items. The number is small. A month ago her queue had two thousand. The legacy queue is being drained. After it is empty, her account will be closed.

She opens the first item.

It is a voice intercept from southern Lebanon. A woman in her sixties, speaking in a Nabatieh dialect that the model has flagged at confidence 0.86 as containing operational language. The conversation is between the woman and her son. The son is asking whether she has packed. The woman is saying yes, she has packed. The son is asking whether she has the documents. The woman is saying yes, she has the documents. The son is asking when the truck is coming. The woman is saying noon, if the road is open.

The model has flagged the phrase *if the road is open*, and has read *the documents* in the operationally suggestive sense rather than the personal sense.

Nadia listens twice.

She types: *Translation: An elderly woman and her son discussing logistics of a departure from her home, likely in response to an Israeli displacement order. The references to packing, documents, and truck timing are consistent with civilian evacuation. The phrase "if the road is open" refers to passability of roads to civilian vehicles. The phrase "the documents" refers to personal identity papers, deeds, or both, which Lebanese civilians typically attempt to retrieve before evacuation. No operational content. Recommend redirection of this item from any priority pool.*

She approves.

The system logs her review.

She does not know whether her review will be propagated downstream. The legacy queue is no longer connected to the priority three pool in the way it was before the rollout. The model is now running ahead of her, processing items at scale, with the QA samplers reviewing on a probability schedule that means they will look at perhaps one item in fifty. The woman from Nabatieh, who is packing her documents and waiting for a truck, has now been

processed by the model with a flag the model has assigned. Whether Nadia's correction will reach anyone with authority to act on it is no longer something she can verify.

She moves to the next item.

She works through the morning. The forty-seven items in her queue are all from southern Lebanon. They are all from the evacuated villages. They are all the small documents of a population being forced off its land. A man calling his brother to ask whether the cousin's tractor can be borrowed. A woman calling her sister to say that the cat cannot be taken. A teenage girl calling her grandmother to say that they are leaving and that she does not want to leave.

Nadia translates each one. She corrects each model misreading. She writes careful, defensible, professionally toned reviews. She does this for ninety minutes.

She finishes the legacy queue at eleven-fifteen and sits quietly at her desk for a moment.

The terminal shows her queue at zero. The message field says: *Legacy review complete. Thank you for your service. Please contact Denise Harlow regarding next steps.*

She does not call Denise. Instead, she closes the terminal, gets up, and walks out to the courtyard.

Priya is there, at the small table. She has not been on the floor much this week. She has been doing handover work, training the four retained linguists on the parts of the work that cannot be reduced to a sampling schedule. The training is technically voluntary. The contractor has offered her a small bonus for it. Priya has accepted because, as she told Nadia, she does not want the new structure to fail in the specific way it is going to fail, and she has decided that helping the four with what she knows is the last useful thing she can do here.

"I finished," Nadia says, sitting down. "My queue is empty."

"Mine too. This morning."

"What did you do for the rest of the day."

"I read. I made tea. I sat at my desk and looked at the wall. I‘ll leave on Friday. I don’t see a reason to stay through the weekend."

"Tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow. Yes."

"Where are you going first."

"Singapore. I want to see my older brother before I go to London. He’s been ill. Not the way my other brother's wife has been ill, which is the urgent kind. But ill in a way that is going to make our next time together possibly be the one where we don’t have another time after it. So I’m going to see him."

"That sounds right."

"What about you."

"I am leaving Sunday. Houston first. Then Granada."

"Have you booked Granada yet."

"Not yet. I am going to book it from Houston. I want to see my mother before I commit to dates."

"That sounds wise."

Priya is quiet for a moment.

"Nadia. Have you said goodbye to Yusuf?"

"Not yet."

"He’s leaving Friday too. He told me yesterday. He has accepted a position in Amman with a Jordanian university. They have a

translation program that wants a junior faculty member. He decided last week. He’s twenty-nine and starting over."

"Yeah, he told me a few days ago."

"He thinks of you as the reason he is doing that and not something else."

"He shouldn’t. He’s doing it because he is who he is."

"You are part of who he is now, Nadia. Let him be grateful. It is one of the few clean things either of you is going to get out of this place."

Nadia does not answer for a moment. Priya is right. Nadia has been resisting the cleanness because she does not feel clean herself. Priya is offering her a different reading. Receive it as the thing it is. Yusuf has chosen Amman. Nadia helped him toward that choice. Whatever else the months in Doha have produced, they have produced a man who is going to teach translation in Amman who was not certain about his futre, six months ago. The cleanness is not for Nadia. It is for him. She is allowed to let him have it.

"All right," she says.

"All right what?"

"I’ll say goodbye to him properly."

"Good."

They sit for a few more minutes. Priya finishes her tea. Nadia eats half of her sandwich and wraps the rest to take home.

When Priya stands up she puts her hand on Nadia's shoulder, briefly, and squeezes. They have not touched in five months of working together. The gesture is the first physical contact between them, and it is also a goodbye, because Priya is leaving tomorrow and tomorrow Nadia will be packing herself, and they may not have another conversation that is not a logistical conversation.

"London," Nadia says. "Tell me when you arrive."

"I will."

"Take care of yourself, Priya."

"You too, Nadia. Go to Granada. Walk slowly. Sit on a bench in the Generalife and let yourself be there."

"I will."

Priya leaves the courtyard.

Nadia sits at the table for a while longer.

In the afternoon she goes to find Yusuf.

He is at his desk. His monitor is off. His pod is one of the outer-ring pods, the ones that have begun to feel ceremonial. He is reading a paperback book. He looks up when she approaches.

"Nadia."

"Yusuf. Walk with me."

He stands up, puts the book down on his desk, face down, and follows her.

They walk together out of the building, through the inner perimeter, to a small bench under a date palm near the gate. The bench is not in a private place, but the patio around it is empty, and they are not being watched in any specific sense. She sits. He sits beside her.

"Priya told me about Amman."

"Yes."

"It’s a good choice."

"I think so."

"In my opinion, it’s the right choice, Yusuf. The university is small but the program is serious. The students will benefit from you, and you will learn what you need to learn from teaching them. You will be a better linguist in three years than you would have been if you had stayed in this work."

"You said something like this to me a month ago. About what survives outside the system."

"I remember."

"You were right."

"I’m sometimes right about other people. I’m less reliable about myself."

He smiles. He is, today, a man whose face has begun to look the way it is going to look during the rest of his career. She can see, sitting next to him, the older man he will become. He has gained something in the past few weeks, a settledness that has nothing to do with comfort and everything to do with having chosen a new direction for his life.

"Yusuf. I want to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"You didn’t come to me because you needed a teacher. You came to me because you were the one ear in this building that was listening for something the building couldn’t give you. I happened to be available. That is the only thing I contributed. The listening was yours from the beginning."

He doesn’t answer for a moment.

Then he says, "I’ll write to you."

"Please do."

"Where will you be."

"Houston first. Then Granada for a while. After that I don’t know."

"I’ll write to you in Granada. And I’ll tell you about my students. And I’ll probablye ask you questions about dialects you can hear better than me. You’ll tell me what you think, and I’ll not always agree, and our disagreements will be how we know we are still doing the work."

"Yes."

"Nadia?"

"Yes."

"Thank you."

She doesn’t say *you’re welcome.* She doesn’t say anything. She simply nods. Nadia reaches over and puts her hand on his hand for a moment, briefly, the way Priya had put her hand on Nadia's shoulder an hour earlier, and she lets her hand rest there for two seconds before she takes it away.

They sit on the bench under the date palm for another minute without speaking.

Then Nadia stands up. She doesn’t say goodbye. They will see each other again before he leaves, in the brief logistical exchanges of two people closing out a workplace. Their goodbye has now been said.

She walks back to her desk.

At five-fifty she signs out. The terminal logs her out. The message field says: *Account in closeout status. No further actions required. Thank you, Nadia.*

She gathers her things. She has not brought much to the compound today, and the not-bringing was deliberate, but there are a few

items in her desk drawer she takes home. A small notebook she had used for vocabulary lists in her first month. A pen Ben had given her, which she brought from Houston without quite knowing why, and which she kept in the drawer for five months. A photograph of the Generalife, a postcard she had bought at a museum in 2017 and had brought with her when she came to Doha.

She puts these things in her bag and walks out of the building.

The car takes her home. The traffic is light. The diplomatic security around the foreign ministry has shifted some of the routes. She watches the city pass. The towers she lived among. The corniche she walked at dawn. The souq she has not visited again since the basket Saturday.

In the apartment she doesn't turn on the lights. Nadia stands in the kitchen and drinks a glass of water.

She opens her phone. She has not booked the flight to Houston yet. She does so now. Sunday morning, May 31. Doha to Houston, with a stop in Frankfurt. She buys the ticket and forwards the confirmation to her mother.

She writes to Ingrid.

Ingrid. The rollout happened ten days ago. My queue is empty. I am leaving Doha on Sunday for Houston, and I will be with my mother for a week or two before going to Granada. I have not booked Granada yet. I want to talk to you before I do. Can we speak this weekend.

Ingrid replies within fifteen minutes.

Saturday morning my time. Whenever works for you. We will talk about Granada and we will talk about the rest. I am very glad you are leaving Doha.

Nadia closes the laptop.

She makes herself dinner, eats at the table. She has decided, sitting down, that the sitting will be a practice she takes with her. Whatever counter she ends up at next, she will sit at it.

After dinner she opens the notebook. She writes, in pencil, in English:

The work is finished. The rollout is in place. I am going home. The man on the road is dead. Rania is alive. The fig tree is standing. My heard is still in Granada. Ben is in Arlington. The system is running without me. I do not know what any of this means. I am going to find out.

She closes the notebook, puts it back in the drawer with the encrypted drive, both items now waiting to be packed.

Nadia lies down in bed at ten. She does not pick up the book. She turns out the light.

In the dark she thinks about the woman from Nabatieh who is packing her documents and waiting for a truck. She thinks about the cat the other woman could not take. She thinks about the girl who did not want to leave.

Chapter 17
The Long Way Home

رَجَعتُ إِلى داري وَقَلبي مَعَ الَّذي تَرَكتُ ورائي مِن جَفاءِ المَنازِلِ

Volví a mi casa con el corazón puesto en lo que dejé atrás, en la aspereza de las moradas.

I returned to my house with my heart still on what I left behind, on the harshness of the dwellings.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, probably 12th c.

Translator noted: *the word jafa here is doing the work of two languages. It means harshness but it also means the failure of welcome. The returning man has not been refused at his old door. He has simply discovered that the door no longer welcomes him.*

She packs on Saturday morning.

There is less to pack than she had expected. The apartment was furnished. The clothes are mostly the clothes she came with. The books she has acquired in five months fit into a single canvas bag. The basket from the Yemeni man goes into the suitcase wrapped in a

blouse. The notebook and the encrypted drive go into her carry-on, in an interior pocket she seldom used. The framed photograph of Ben on the bookshelf she wraps in a t-shirt and places at the center of the suitcase, surrounded by other folded things, where it cannot move.

She turned in her work badge on Friday at the security desk on her way out of the compound, exchanging it for a sheet of paper that said *Account closed. Property returned.* The man at the desk had taken the badge without looking at her, stamped the paper, and given it to her. She threw the paper away in a bin near the elevator.

In the afternoon she calls Ingrid. They had scheduled the call for Saturday morning Uppsala time, which is Saturday afternoon Doha time. The call is on Signal. Ingrid answers on the first ring.

"Nadia."

"Ingrid."

"You’re leaving tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow morning. Six-forty flight."

"Tell me how you are."

"I’m ready. I think. I’m also tired in a way I haven’t been able to put down."

"You’ll be able to put it down soon. Not all of it. Some of it."

"Yes."

"Tell me about your planned trip to Granada."

"I want to come. I don’t yet know when. My mother wants me for a while. So I’m thinking the second half of June, maybe. Three weeks in Houston, then Granada."

"Stay in Houston as long as your mother needs you. Granada will always be there. So will his spirit."

"Yes."

"Do you want to know about his widow."

Nadia is quiet for a moment.

"Ingrid? Have you been in touch with her?"

"She wrote to me in November after she got my Christmas card. She's in an apartment in the Realejo. Her daughter and son visit sometimes, but she's alone most of the time. She would want to see you, Nadia. She has wanted to see you for two years. She didn't know how to ask."

Nadia closes her eyes for a moment.

"All right."

"I'll write to her tonight. I'll tell her you're coming in the second half of June.

"Thank you, Ingrid."

"Nadia. One more thing."

"Yes."

"The drive."

"Yes."

"You're taking it with you on the plane."

"I am."

"In your carry-on?"

"In an interior pocket. Yes."

"That's the right place for it. Don't put it in the suitcase. If the suitcase is lost or searched in a way that produces questions, you don't want the

drive in it. The carry-on stays with you. If anyone asks you about the drive at any checkpoint between Doha and Houston, which they probably won’t because you aren’t flagged, you say it contains personal notes and translations from your graduate work. You don’t have to explain it further. You don’t have to volunteer any information."

"All right."

"You’ve transited through Frankfurt before?"

"Yes."

"German security is professional. They won’t give you trouble. American security in Houston will be efficient and bored. The risk window is the Doha airport itself, and even there it’s small, because contractor personnel rotate through that airport daily and your departure isn’t unusual. Walk through. Don’t look around. Don’t behave in any way that distinguishes you from any other woman flying home."

"Ingrid, you sound like a woman who has thought a lot about this."

"I have. I’ve been thinking about it since you wrote to me in April. And I’ve spent several hours imagining what could go wrong at each stage and what you should do. I’m telling you now because I want you to be prepared and I don’t want you to be unprepared."

"Thank you."

"Call me from Frankfurt. Just to say you are through."

"I will."

"And from Houston when you arrive."

"I will."

"I love you, Nadia."

"I love you, too, Ingrid. Thank you for everything."

They hang up.

Nadia sits on the couch with the phone in her hand for several minutes. She had not realized how much of Ingrid's worry had been operational rather than emotional. Or how much of it had been both. She has been thinking of Ingrid as a friend who has been holding her in mind. She has not been thinking of Ingrid as a strategist who has been planning her exit from the carry-on outward. The two are not in conflict. They are the same kind of love expressed in two registers.

In the evening she takes one last walk in the city.

She does not take the car. She walks out of her building, through the corniche, past the bench where she had sat in March to watch a fishing dhow go south, and on toward the souq. The walk takes forty minutes. She arrives at the souq just before sunset.

Nadia doesn't buy anything. She walks the lanes she had walked on the Saturday in May. She passes the Yemeni man's shop. The shop is closed. The metal shutter is down. She does not know whether he has closed for the evening or for the week or for the war. She stands in front of the closed shutter for a moment. She thinks: I will never see him again. The thinking is not sad. It is the recognition of a person she has known briefly and whose name she does not know, whose village she could not find on a map without help, who had wrapped a basket in brown paper for her on a difficult morning. The world contains all of these things at once.

She walks back through the souq in the gathering blue light. The vendors are closing. A man sweeping the stone floor in front of his shop nods to her as she passes. She nods back.

She takes a taxi home from the edge of the souq. The driver is Pakistani. He does not speak. She does not ask him anything. She watches the city.

In the apartment she doesn't turn on the lights. She stands in the kitchen. She drinks a glass of water.

She thinks: this is her last evening in Doha.

She is not sentimental about it. She has lived in Doha for seven months. The city has held her, in its way. It has also been the place where she did the work that has cost her something she has not yet finished counting. Both of these are true. The apartment is a furnished company rental that will, by the end of next week, hold a different contractor employee, who will hang her own clothes in the closet and stand at the counter to drink her own coffee in the morning. The apartment will not remember Nadia. But Nadia will remember that apartment for the rest of her life.

She goes to bed at ten. She sleeps lightly. She wakes at four. She does not try to sleep again.

The car is waiting at four-forty. The driver is the new driver, the one she has not bothered to ask for his name. He puts her two pieces of luggage in the trunk and drives her to the airport.

At the airport she does what Ingrid told her to do. She does not look around. She does not behave in any way that distinguishes her from any other woman flying home. She moves through check-in, through security, through passport control, with the unremarkable efficiency of a contractor finishing a rotation. The man at the security checkpoint glances at her carry-on, glances at her, and waves her through. Nobody asks her about the drive. Nobody asks her about the notebook. She is one of perhaps three hundred Western contractor personnel rotating through Doha that morning.

She walks to the gate, buys a coffee and waits for boarding. The flight to Frankfurt leaves on time.

The flight is six hours and forty minutes. She does not read. She does not watch the screen. She has a window seat. The plane crosses the Persian Gulf, the southeastern corner of Iraq, eastern Turkey, the Balkans, central Europe. She watches the light change outside the window as the plane moves north and west. She sleeps for perhaps an hour.

At one point, somewhere over the Mediterranean, she sees, far below, what may be the coast of Lebanon, although she cannot be sure. It might be Syria. It might be Cyprus. The window seat does not give her a way to know. She presses her forehead briefly against the glass. The cold of the window is a thing she had forgotten airplane windows produced. She watches the coastline, or what she thinks is the coastline, pass.

She thinks: somewhere down there is Rania.

She does not know where Rania is. She knows Rania is alive. She knows Rania is in a country that has been bombed for three months. She knows the village in the Chouf still stands, that the fig tree is still in the garden, that the foundation, in Rania's phrase, is always there. She does not know whether Rania is in the Chouf, in Beirut, in a village further south, in a tent put up for the displaced. She does not know whether she will ever know.

She moves her forehead from the glass. She closes her eyes. She does not sleep.

Frankfurt is brisk and efficient and impersonal in the German way. She has a two-hour layover. She walks the terminal, buys a sandwich and calls Ingrid from the gate.

"I’m through. I’m in Frankfurt."

"Good. The next flight is the easy one."

"Yes."

"I love you."

"I love you too."

She hangs up.

The flight to Houston is nine hours and twenty minutes. The plane is half empty. The seat next to her is unoccupied. She puts her carry-on on the seat. She watches the screen of the flight map for a while, the slow arc across the North Atlantic. She sleeps. She wakes. She drinks water. She does not eat the meal.

Somewhere over Newfoundland she opens her notebook for the first time on the journey. She writes, in pencil, in English:

Doha is behind. Lebanon is below. Rania is somewhere I cannot see. I am going home.

She closes the notebook.

She does not write again.

Houston is hot.

The plane lands at George Bush Intercontinental at four in the afternoon local time. The Texas summer has arrived. She walks off the jetway into the warm air of the terminal and through customs and out into the larger warmth of the arrival hall, where her mother is waiting.

Her mother is smaller than Nadia remembers. This is the way mothers are when one has not seen them in two years, in their late seventies, after a year of watching the news. Her mother is in a

navy linen dress and the small gold earrings she has worn since she was thirty. Her hair is whiter than the last time. Her face is the same face. She is standing with her hands at her sides and she is watching the arrival doors with the particular concentration of a woman whose daughter is supposed to come through them.

Nadia walks toward her.

They meet at the railing. They hold each other. Neither speaks. Her mother is crying quietly. Nadia is not crying, although she may begin in a moment. They hold each other for what is probably thirty seconds and feels like much longer.

Her mother steps back. She takes Nadia's face in both hands. She looks at her properly.

"Habibti."

"Mama."

"You are too thin."

"I will eat."

"You will eat tonight. I have made everything."

"All of it?"

"All of it."

Nadia laughs, briefly, and her mother laughs with her, and they walk together toward the parking garage.

Michel is not there. Michel is at work. Michel will come for dinner. Michel's wife will not. The two children will. Her mother updates her on the family logistics as they walk. Nadia listens. She is not yet capable of processing more than the surface of what her mother is saying, but the surface is enough. The names. The schedules. The fact

of being in a country where the schedules of children matter and are spoken about.

The drive from the airport to Braeswood takes forty minutes. Her mother drives. Her mother has driven her own car since Nadia's father died, and the driving is not a strain on her. They take I-45 south to 610 west, and they pass the parts of Houston Nadia remembers and the parts that have changed, and the parts that have not changed but that she sees differently now than she did when she was seventeen.

Her mother does not ask about the work. Her mother asks about the flight. Her mother asks about Ingrid, whom her mother has not met but has heard about for fifteen years. Her mother asks whether Nadia has eaten on the plane. Her mother asks whether the weather in Doha had been very hot. Her mother does the work of a Lebanese mother who has not seen her daughter in two years, which is to fill the car with the unimportant things until the important things become possible.

At the house in Braeswood the smell from the kitchen is the smell of every Sunday lunch from Nadia's childhood. Lamb with cumin. Rice with vermicelli. Lentil and chard stew. The kibbeh her mother makes only when a guest is coming. The mejadra. The salad with the lemon dressing that her grandmother had made and that her mother had learned from her grandmother in the village and that Nadia had never quite learned to make.

The kitchen table is set for six. Her mother has invited Michel and the two children, and has set a place for Michel's wife in case she comes after all, and has set a place for Nadia at the head, where her father used to sit.

Nadia looks at the place at the head of the table.

She does not say anything. Her mother does not say anything. The placement is what it is.

She puts her bags in her old bedroom, which is now a guest room but which still has the small framed photograph of her at her Rice graduation on the bookshelf. She washes her face. She comes back down. Michel and the children arrive at six.

Michel is older than Nadia remembers, in the way Michel always is. The children are nine and seven. They are shy with her for ten minutes and then they are not. The older one asks her if she has been on an airplane, which is a question she answers with patience even though she has been on two of them in the past sixteen hours. The younger one asks her if she is going to stay. She tells him she is going to stay for a few weeks.

Dinner is loud. The food is everything. She eats. She eats more than she had thought she could eat. Her mother watches her eat with the small steady satisfaction of a woman whose daughter is eating *her* food at *her* table.

After dinner the children go into the living room. Michel sits at the table with their mother and Nadia. The television in the living room is on, low. The children are watching something. The news comes on briefly between segments of the children's program. Nadia catches a fragment. A clip of a former cabinet official. The phrase *Trump's Vietnam.* The reporter's voice describing the latest from Lebanon.

Her mother gets up and changes the channel for the children. They protest. She changes it back to their show.

Michel watches Nadia watching the television.

"It is a hard time," Michel says, in the way men in their fifties say such things when they cannot say more.

"It is."

"You were in the middle of it."

"I was at the edge of it. I was not in the middle of it."

"Closer than the rest of us."

"Yes."

He does not press. He has not pressed her about her work in fifteen years. He is not going to start now.

Their mother brings out coffee.

They sit in the kitchen for another hour, the three of them, talking about nothing important, which is to say about everything important. The neighbor's garden. The new priest. The cousin in California who has had a second child. The shop on Bissonnet that recently closed. A new shop on Bellaire that just opened.

At nine-thirty Michel takes the children home.

Nadia and her mother are alone in the kitchen.

Her mother looks at her.

"Habibti."

"Yes."

"You are home."

"I am."

"Go to bed. We will talk about everything tomorrow."

"Yes, Mama."

She goes upstairs to the guest room. She unpacks her carry-on. She places the notebook on the bedside table. She places the encrypted drive in the drawer of the desk. She places the framed photograph of Ben on the bookshelf next to the photograph of herself at Rice graduation.

She washes. She brushes her teeth in the bathroom she has known since she was eleven.

She lies down in the bed.

The ceiling above her is the ceiling of her childhood bedroom, which is now a guest room, which is still her room in a way she had not expected to recognize.

She thinks: I am home. The word does not fully fit. It also does not fully not-fit.

She sleeps.

In the dark, deeply, for the first time in months, she sleeps the way a person sleeps when she has finally stopped traveling.

In the morning the Texas sun comes through the curtains. The house is quiet. She lies in bed for a while before she gets up. She is going to be here for several weeks. She is going to be a daughter for several weeks. After that she is going to Granada. After that she does not yet know.

Chapter 18
The Road Reopens

أَرى الأَيّامَ تَفعَلُ ما تَشاءُ وَيَأبى أَن يَزولَ بِها الرَجاءُ

Veo que los días hacen lo que quieren, y aun así la esperanza se niega a desaparecer.

I see the days do what they will, and still hope refuses to vanish with them.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, undated

Translator noted: *the second line is the harder one. The poet does not say hope is justified. He says only that it refuses to leave. There is a difference between a hope that is reasonable and a hope that will not go.*

Nadia has been in Houston for two weeks.

The two weeks have done something she had not expected them to do. They have slowed her down. The first three days she slept, deeply and long, the sleep of a body that had been holding itself upright for almost a year and had finally been told it could lie down. She woke late each morning, disoriented, in the guest room that had been her childhood bedroom, and had lain in the bed

listening to the house, which made the sounds it had always made, the air conditioning cycling, the ice maker dropping its small load into the tray, her mother moving in the kitchen below.

By the second week she had begun to be a person again. She had gone to the grocery store with her mother. She had driven her mother's car to the dry cleaner, the same dry cleaner the family had used for thirty years, run now by the son of the man who had run it when Nadia was in high school. She had sat in the backyard in the evenings when the heat broke, watching the light go down through the live oak her father planted in 1991, which was now enormous and shaded the entire yard.

She had begun to eat. Her mother watched this with satisfaction and said nothing about it, which was its own form of love. By the end of the second week Nadia had stopped catching her own reflection and being surprised by how thin she had become.

She had not yet booked the Granada trip. She told Ingrid she would book it from Houston, but so far she had not done it. She told herself she was waiting until she knew how long her mother needed her. This was true. It was also not the whole truth. The whole truth was that she was not yet ready to leave the security of her mother's house, where the live oak shaded the yard and the dry cleaner was run by the son of the man who had run it years ago, and where she could be, for a few weeks, a daughter rather than whatever she had been in Doha.

The news comes on a Tuesday morning.

She is at the kitchen table with her coffee. Her mother is at the counter, making the small breakfast she always makes, bread, labneh, olives, and tea. The television in the living room is on, low, tuned to the news the way her mother keeps it tuned to the news now, a habit from the war.

The anchor says the words *memorandum of understanding.*

Nadia gets up, walks to the living room, and turns up the volume.

The report is about a new deal. It is the most recent of dozens of such announcements. The United States and Iran have signed a memorandum of understanding. The ceasefire is to be extended for sixty days. The Strait of Hormuz is to be reopened immediately. Sanctions are to begin to be lifted if Iran complies. Nuclear talks are to be held over the next two months. The agreement, the report says, includes Lebanon.

Nadia stands in front of the television.

The report cuts to recent footage. Lebanese residents returning to their homes in the south. The Nabatieh district. A district called Froun, which the anchor pronounces incorrectly. The footage shows a road. Cars on the road. A family in a small truck loaded with belongings, driving south, back toward the villages they had been ordered to leave. The Lebanese army deploying some troops. A woman getting out of a car in front of a house that is damaged but still standing. The woman puts her hand on the wall of the house. The footage does not stay on her long enough for Nadia to see whether the woman is crying.

Her mother has come to stand beside her.

They watch the footage together.

"They are going back," her mother asks.

"Some of them. To the places that are still there," Nadia answers.

"Najwa says the road to the village has been open since last week. The Chouf was never closed the way the south was closed. But the road from Beirut, she says, has been bad. Checkpoints. Israeli positions. She says it is better now."

Nadia turns to look at her mother.

"You’ve been talking to Najwa?"

"I talk to Najwa every week, habibti. She is my cousin's daughter. Who else am I going to talk to about the village."

"You didn’t tell me you were talking to her about the road."

"You did not ask."

This is true. Nadia had not asked. She had been protecting herself from the road the way she had been protecting herself from the house, by not asking. Her mother, who has been talking to Najwa every week, has known the state of the road the whole time, and has not volunteered it, because Nadia had not asked, and because her mother has learned, over a long life, when a thing should be offered and when it should be waited for.

"Mama. Why are you telling me now."

Her mother looks at the television. The footage has moved on to something else. A reporter standing in front of a building in Beirut.

"Because the road is open," her mother says. "Because you have been sitting in my kitchen for two weeks not asking about the road. Because I have watched you decide not to ask, the way you decide not to ask about things that matter to you most. And because I think you are getting ready to ask, and I wanted to answer the question before you had to find the courage to put it."

Nadia does not say anything.

Her mother turns the television down. She goes back to the kitchen and finishes making the breakfast.

"Eat," she says.

Nadia sits. She eats.

After a few minutes her mother says, without looking up from her tea, "You are thinking about going to the village."?

"I don’t know."

"But you are thinking about it?"

"Yes."

"You should go."

Nadia looks at her.

"Mama?"

"I have thought about this, habibti. I have thought about it for two weeks, since you arrived, because I have known you were going to come to it eventually. You are going to Granada. You *should* go to Granada. He is buried there and you need to go to him. But you should also go to the village. You should see the house. You should sit under the fig tree. You should drink coffee with Najwa on the terrace where I drank coffee with my mother. You have not been there in twenty-three years. The house has been waiting."

"It isn’t safe, Mama."

"It is safer than it was. It is not safe the way Houston is safe. It is safe the way the village has always been safe, which is to say it is in Lebanon, and Lebanon is never entirely safe, and you grew up understanding this, and your grandmother lived her whole life there understanding it, and she did not let it stop her from making a life."

Nadia is quiet.

"Mama. There is something else."

Her mother waits.

"There is someone there. From when I was a child. Rania. Do you remember Rania."

Her mother sets down her tea.

"The Muslim girl. From the house down the lane. The one you climbed the tree with."

"Yes."

"I remember her. Her mother and I were never close. But the two of you were always together that summer. The whole summer. I could not separate you. You came home one evening with figs all down the front of your dress and you would not tell me where you had been."

"We had been in the tree."

"I knew where you had been. I was making you tell me anyway."

Nadia almost smiles.

"Mama. Rania is still there. In Lebanon. I don't know exactly where. But I know she is alive. I lost touch with her years ago, when the letters stopped. When email took over her village didn't have it. I've thought about her over the years. And recently I've had reason to think about her more."

She stops. She is at the edge of what she can say.

Her mother watches her.

"What reason," her mother asks.

Nadia does not answer for a moment.

"I can't tell you all of it, Mama. Some of it has to do with the work I was doing, which I can't talk about. But the short version is that I came to understand, while I was in Doha, that Rania was in danger. And I was in a position to know it, and not in a position to do anything about it, except in small ways that I'm not sure mattered. But she is

alive. I know she is alive. And I don’t know whether the fact that she is alive has anything to do with the small things I did, or whether she is alive because she was lucky, or because she was careful, or for no reason at all. I simply don’t know. I’m probably never going to know."

Her mother is quiet for a long moment.

Then she says, "You were protecting her. From something in your work."

"I was trying to. In a way I can’t explain."

"And now you want to go and find out if she is all right."

"I don’t know if I want to find her, Mama. I don’t even know if I should. She isn’t the girl from the tree anymore. She has made choices in her life that I would not have made. Her politics are not my politics. Her world is not my world. We haven’t spoken in over twenty years. If I go and find her, I don’t know what I will find. I might find a stranger. I might find someone I can’t agree with about anything. I might find someone who doesn’t want to see me."

"All of that is possible," her mother says.

"Yes."

"You should go anyway."

Nadia looks at her.

"Habibti. Listen to your mother. I am seventy-eight years old. I have buried my husband and I have buried my own mother and I have buried two of my brothers. I have learned one thing about the people we lose touch with. The losing touch is almost never a decision. It is a thing that happens while we are looking somewhere else. The letters stop. The email does not reach. The

years go by. And then one day there is a road, and the road is open, and the only thing standing between you and the person is the courage to drive down it. You may find a stranger. You may find someone you cannot agree with. But you will have driven down the road. And you will know. And knowing, habibti, even when it is hard, is better than the not-knowing you have been carrying for all of these years. I have watched you carry it. I did not know her name until five minutes ago. But I have watched you carry her."

Nadia does not say anything.

She cannot.

Her mother reaches across the table and puts her hand over Nadia's hand.

"Go to Granada," her mother says. "Go to your teacher. And then go to the village. Sit under the tree. And if you can find the girl from the lane, find her. And if you cannot, or if she is not who you hoped, then at least you will have sat under the tree, and you will have seen the house, and you will have driven down the road."

They sit at the table for a long time after that.

Her mother does not push further. She has said what she wanted to say, what she has apparently been waiting two weeks to say, and she lets it sit.

Nadia finishes her breakfast. She helps her mother clear the table. They wash the dishes together, her mother washing, Nadia drying, the way they did when Nadia was a girl, the way her mother and grandmother must have done in the village before that.

In the afternoon Nadia goes up to her old room. She sits at the desk, opens her laptop.

She books a flightGranada. She had been putting it off for two weeks. She books it now, a flight from Houston to Madrid to Granada, departing in twelve days, on the first of July. She does not book a return. She leaves the return open.

Then she opens a map and finds Lebanon. She looks at the Chouf. She finds the village, or the place where she remembers the village to be, the small dot above the valley that opens toward the sea. She looks at the roads. She looks at the road from Beirut, the one Najwa says is better now. She looks at the distance from Granada to Beirut, which is a thing she has never had reason to measure before. It turns out to be a straight flight, four hours and a little more.

She does not book Lebanon. Not yet. She isn't ready. But she has looked at the map. She has measured the distance. She has let the possibility take a shape it did not have this morning.

She closes her laptop and takes out the notebook. She writes, in pencil, in English:

The road is open. Mama has known about the road the whole time. She told me to go to the village. She told me to find Rania if I can. I have booked Granada. I have looked at the map for Lebanon. I have not booked it. But I have looked.

She sits at the desk for a while, looking out the window at the live oak her father planted, which shades the whole yard now. It was just a sapling when she was a child. It is enormous now, and it will outlive her mother and probably outlive her, and which is, she thinks, a thing her father put in the ground knowing he would not see it reach its full size, the way a person plants a tree, or raises a child, or teaches a student, or keeps a house in a village above a valley, for the sake of a future he will not be there to inhabit.

The foundation is always there.

So, sometimes, is the tree.

Chapter 19
The Realejo

سَأَتْرُكُ في الدُنيا أُموراً كَثيرَةً وَأَمضي وَفي نَفسي أُمورٌ تَجولُ

Dejaré en el mundo muchos asuntos sin terminar, y partiré con cosas que aún dan vueltas en mi alma.

I will leave many matters in the world unfinished, and depart with things still turning in my soul.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, undated

The translator noted: *every honest person dies in the middle of a sentence. The dishonest ones die having pretended to finish theirs.*

Nadia arrives in Granada on the first of July.

The flight from Madrid is short. The descent into the small airport in the Vega, the wide green plain below the city, with the Sierra Nevada rising behind, is a descent she has made before, years ago, as a younger woman. The mountains still have snow on the highest peaks, even in July. She had forgotten this. She presses her forehead to the window as the plane comes down, the way she had

pressed it to the window over the Mediterranean a month ago, looking for a coastline she could not be sure of. This time she knows exactly what she is looking at. The Vega. The city on its hills. The white peaks behind. She knows this place. It knows her.

She takes a taxi to the small hotel she has booked in the lower city, near the cathedral, a few streets from the café where she had first met Ben. She does not go to the café. Not the first day. She checks in. She unpacks. She places the notebook on the bedside table and the encrypted drive in the room safe, which she had not needed to do in Houston, but which she does here, because she is in a hotel and not in her mother's house.

She sleeps that night with the window open. The sounds of the lower city come up to her, the scooters, the voices, the church bells marking the hours. She had forgotten the bells. She lies awake listening to them for a while before she sleeps.

Nadia goes to the cemetery on the second day.

The cemetery is on the hill above the Alhambra, the Cementerio de San José, with a view across the city that the dead do not need and the living cannot help noticing. She takes a taxi up. She has the location of the grave from Ingrid, who got it from the widow. A section, a row, a number.

She walks through the cemetery in the morning, before the heat. The cypresses stand in their dark vertical lines. The graves are marked in the Spanish way, many of them with photographs of the dead set into the stone, oval portraits behind glass, faces looking out at the visitor. She walks past generations of Granadinos, their faces in the oval frames, their dates, the flowers some of them have and others do not.

She finds the section. She finds the row. She walks along it, reading the names, until she comes to his.

His name is on the stone. His dates. Below the dates, a line in Spanish, which the widow must have chosen, and which Nadia reads and then reads again, because it is not what she expected and it is exactly right.

Tradujo lo que pudo.

He translated what he could.

She stands in front of the stone for a long time.

She does not cry, although she had thought she might. What she feels is not grief in the acute sense. The acute grief was two years ago, when she got the news in Boston and did not call him back in time, when she flew to Granada for a funeral that she attended in a fog. What she feels now, standing at the stone with the city below and the Sierra Nevada behind, is something steadier. The presence of a man who is gone. The fact of him. The line on the stone that someone who loved him had chosen, that says, without sentiment, the truest thing that could be said about a translator. He translated what he could. Not everything. Not perfectly. What he could.

She had brought nothing to leave. She hadn’t thought to bring flowers, and she is glad now that she hadn’t, because flowers would have been wrong, would have been a gesture toward a man who had no patience for gestures. Instead she does the thing she knows he would have wanted.

She speaks to him.

She speaks in Spanish, quietly, standing in front of the stone, not performing, not weeping, just speaking, the way she would have spoken to him across his desk in the office with the orange tree in the courtyard.

She tells him where she has been. She tells him about Doha. She tells him about the room, and the queue, and the model, and the

corrections she wrote and the corrections she refused to write. She tells him about Weller and the offer she declined. She tells him about Yusuf, who is going to teach in Amman. She tells him about Rania. She tells him that the machines did the thing he said they could never do, and also did not do the thing he was right about, and that she has been living for months inside the gap between the two, the gap he had named years ago in his office, and that she has not known, the whole time, whether she was honoring what he taught her or betraying it.

She tells him she is sorry she did not call him back in time.

She stands in front of the stone in the morning light and she finishes saying what she came to say, and then she is quiet, and the cypresses are quiet, and the city below is beginning its day, and the snow on the high peaks is the same snow it has always been.

She puts her hand flat on the top of the stone for a moment. The stone is warm from the sun.

Then she takes her hand away, and she walks back down through the cemetery, past the faces in the oval frames, and out the gate.

She meets the widow that afternoon.

The apartment is in the Realejo, the old Jewish quarter on the slope below the Alhambra, in a building that is four hundred years old and has been added to and subtracted from across the centuries in the way of buildings in this city. The widow buzzes her in. Nadia climbs the worn stone stairs to the third floor.

The widow is waiting at the open door.

She is older than Nadia remembers, which is to say she is in her seventies now, where she had been in her sixties when Nadia knew her. She is small and upright. She has the particular elegance of a certain kind of Granadina woman of her generation, the elegance that does not

depend on money, that is a matter of carriage and attention and the way a scarf is arranged. Her name is Pilar. Nadia had always called her Doña Pilar, and does so now, and Doña Pilar waves the formality away with one hand and takes Nadia's face in both of hers and kisses her on both cheeks and holds her for a moment at arm's length, looking at her.

"Nadia," she says. "You came."

"I came."

"Two years. I have wanted to see you for two years. Ingrid told me you were not ready. I understood. One is not ready when one is not ready. Come in. Come in."

The apartment is full of books. The walls of the entry, the hallway, the main room, all of them lined with books, in Spanish and Arabic and French and English, the library of a man who spent his life among languages. The furniture is old and good. There is a balcony with a view, through the gap between two buildings, of one tower of the Alhambra shines, lit gold in the afternoon sun.

Doña Pilar makes coffee. They sit. They talk.

They talk for a long time. About the mentor. About the years Nadia studied with him. About the funeral, which Nadia barely remembers, and which Doña Pilar remembers in detail and recounts gently, filling in for Nadia the parts she had been too numb to absorb. About Ben, whom Doña Pilar had met once, on the trip when Nadia brought him to Granada, and whom Doña Pilar remembers, and about whom she says the thing that no one has said to Nadia in exactly this way: "He was a serious man. I could see why my husband liked him. My husband did not like many people, you understand. He liked your Ben. He told me, after you brought him to dinner, that the American officer was a man who asked real questions. From my husband, this was everything."

Nadia had not known that the mentor had said this about Ben. She files it, the way she files the things about the mentor that reach her now only through others, after his death, the small judgments that survive him but arrive too late.

They talk until the light on the Alhambra tower has gone from gold to amber.

Then Doña Pilar sets down her coffee cup and looks at Nadia and says, "There is something I am to give you."

"To give me?"

"He left it for you. Not in the will, nothing so formal. He told me, in the last months, that if you ever came back to Granada, I was to give it to you. He was specific. He said: when Nadia comes, and she will come, give her the box from the bottom drawer. He said you would understand it better than anyone, that it was unfinished, and that you were the only one of his students who might know what to do with it. I did not know what was in it. I have not read it. It was for you."

Doña Pilar rises. She goes into another room. She comes back carrying a wooden box, the kind of box that once held a ream of fine paper, worn at the corners, with the mentor's hand on the lid in faded ink: a single word, *máquinas.*

Machines.

She sets the box on the table in front of Nadia.

"I will leave you with it," Doña Pilar says. "I am going to sit on the balcony. Take whatever time you need. There is no hurry. There has been no hurry for two years. There is no hurry now."

She goes out onto the balcony and sits in the chair facing the Alhambra tower, with her back to the room, giving Nadia the privacy of her own attention.

Nadia opens the box.

The box is full of paper.

Not a manuscript. Not a finished anything. Loose sheets, index cards, the backs of envelopes, pages torn from notebooks, all of them covered in the mentor's hand, in Spanish and Arabic and occasionally English, in ink of different colors from different days, some of it pencil, some of it dashed off quickly and some of it written slowly and carefully. The papers are not ordered. They are not numbered. They have been thrown into the box across what must have been a period of years, in no sequence, as the thoughts came to him.

She lifts out the top sheet.

At the top of it, underlined twice, in his hand, is a question. Not a statement. A question. The question he had apparently been carrying, the question that had organized all the disordered thinking in the box, the question he had written at the top of the pile so that whomever opened it would know what the pile was about.

¿Por qué debe ser un ser humano el último traductor en quien se confía?

Why must a human being be the last translator who is trusted?

She reads it. She reads it again.

It is not a rhetorical question. She knows him too well to read it as rhetorical. If it were rhetorical, if he were simply asserting that of course a human must be the last trusted translator, he would have written it as a statement. He wrote it as a question because he did not know the answer. He had spent his last years not defending the obvious but interrogating it. The man who had raged in his office,

years ago, that the machines would never replace a skilled linguist, had spent the end of his life asking himself whether his rage had been right, and if it had been right, why. Why must it be a human. What is the actual argument. Not the feeling. The argument.

She begins to read the papers.

They are everything she had hoped and feared they would be. They do not agree with each other. On one sheet he argues, with force, that the machine cannot be the last trusted translator because the machine has no stake in the consequences of its errors, and that trust requires stake, that we trust those who will suffer if they are wrong. On another sheet, written perhaps on a different day, in a different ink, he argues against himself: but the human translator in the war room also does not suffer the consequences of his errors, the consequences are suffered by the people whose words he renders, so the human has no more stake than the machine, and the argument from stake collapses. On a third sheet he picks the argument back up from a different angle: no, the human has stake because the human can be held to account, can be named, can be made to answer, and a machine cannot be made to answer, and trust is not about stake but about accountability. On a fourth he undermines this too: but we do not, in fact, hold the human translators to account, they are anonymous, they are contractors, no one knows their names, the accountability is a fiction.

She reads on. Her hands are not steady.

He had been thinking about exactly her situation. Not knowing it. He had died before her situation existed in the form she had lived it. But he had been thinking about exactly it, in the abstract, in the years before his death, circling it, arguing both sides, refusing to let himself rest on the comfortable answer.

On one card, near the bottom of the box, in pencil, in a hand that is shakier than the others, perhaps from late in his illness, he had written something that is not an argument at all. It is closer to a confession.

Quizá tengo miedo. Quizá toda mi vida ha sido una apuesta por algo que no puedo demostrar. Que el oído humano importa. Que la atención es sagrada. No puedo demostrarlo. Sólo puedo vivir como si fuera verdad, y enseñar a otros a vivir así, y esperar.

Perhaps I am afraid. Perhaps my whole life has been a wager on something I cannot prove. That the human ear matters. That attention is sacred. I cannot prove it. I can only live as if it were true, and teach others to live so, and hope.

Nadia sets the card down on the table.

She sits in the apartment in the Realejo, with the box of her teacher's unfinished thinking in front of her, with Doña Pilar on the balcony with her back turned, with the gold gone from the Alhambra tower and the amber going too, and she understands, finally, what he has left her.

He has not left her an answer. He has left her his uncertainty. He has left her the evidence that he, the man whose conviction she had carried for years as if it were settled, had not had it settled at all. That his conviction had been a wager. That he had known it was a wager. That he had made the wager anyway, with his whole life, not because he could prove it but because he had decided that living as if it were true was better than living as if it were not, and that teaching others to live so was the only way the wager could outlast him.

He had been right about the work. He had been wrong about the machines, in the narrow sense of the market. And on the deepest

question, the one at the top of the box, he had not been certain at all. He had been afraid. He had wagered anyway.

This is the most valuable thing he could have left her. Not certainty. The permission to act without it.

She puts the papers back in the box, in the disorder she found them, because the disorder is part of what they are. She closes the lid. She runs her finger over the word on the lid. *Máquinas.*

She gets up. She goes out onto the balcony.

Doña Pilar turns in her chair.

"You read it," Doña Pilar says.

"I scimmed most of it."

"Do you know what to do with it."

Nadia looks out at the Alhambra tower, which is almost in shadow now, the last light leaving it.

"Not yet," she says. "But I know more than I did an hour ago."

Doña Pilar nods. She does not ask what was in the box. She has waited two years and she is not going to ask now. Whatever it was, it was between her husband and his student, and she has done her part, which was to keep it and to give it.

"Stay for dinner," Doña Pilar says. "I have made too much, as I always do. Stay, and tell me more about your mother, and about this place you are going next, wherever it is. I can see in your face that you are going somewhere next. You have the face of a woman who has not finished her journey."

Nadia stays for dinner.

They eat on the balcony, with the Alhambra going dark above them and the lights of the Realejo coming on below, and they talk, two women who loved the same man, late into the Granada night.

She walks back to her hotel near midnight.

She takes the long way, down through the Realejo and along the Carrera del Darro, the old street that runs beside the river below the Alhambra, the street she had walked a thousand times as a young woman. The river is low in July. The stone bridges arch over it. The Alhambra rises on her left, floodlit now, the way it had not been floodlit in the morning over the cemetery, the way it is floodlit for the tourists who are not here at midnight.

She stops on one of the bridges. She looks up at the floodlit walls.

She thinks about the box. She thinks about the question at the top of the pile. She thinks about the card in the shaky hand. *I can only live as if it were true, and teach others to live so, and hope.*

She thinks about the encrypted drive in the safe in her hotel room.

She thinks about Lebanon, four hours away by air, where a road is open, where a woman she has not seen in twenty-three years is alive somewhere, where a house with a fig tree still stands.

She has two journeys in front of her now, and a decision about a third thing, the drive, the thing she carried out of Doha, the record she made.

She does not have to decide tonight.

Chapter 20
What She Leaves, What She Carries

سَأَمضي إلى ما لا أَعلَمُ وَأَترُكُ عِندَكَ ما لا أَنساهُ

Partiré hacia lo que no conozco, y dejaré contigo lo que no puedo olvidar.

I will go toward what I do not know, and leave with you what I cannot forget.

—Anonymous, Andalusian, undated

Translator noted: *the two halves of the line are the whole of a life. We go toward the unknown. We leave the unforgettable in the keeping of those we trust. There is nothing else to do with either.*

Nadia stays in Granada for four more days.

She walks the city in the mornings, before the heat, the way she walked it as a young woman. She goes up to the Albayzín and stands at the Mirador de San Nicolás, where she once stood with Ben on the afternoon they met, where he said, "Why has nobody ever told me how

beautiful Granada is?” The Alhambra is there, across the gorge, against the Sierra Nevada, exactly as it was. She does not stay long. She does not need to. She had been afraid that the place would undo her. It doesn’t. It holds her, and that is different.

She goes to the café near the cathedral. She had not gone their on her first day back in Granada. On the third day she goes. She sits at a table, not the table where she had waited for Ben, because she can’t remember which table it was. She is glad she can’t, and she orders a coffee, and she watches the street, and she lets herself be a woman drinking a coffee in Granada in July, which is a thing she has not been in a very long time, and which she had not been sure she would ever be again.

She walks along the Darro in the evenings, crosses the bridges, and looks up at the floodlit walls. The river is low. The swifts come out at dusk and turn in the air above the gorge.

She doesn’t go back to the cemetery. She already said what she came to say. To go again would be to ask a grave for something, and she has stopped asking for advice from dead people. His headstone says what it says. *He translated what he could.* She carries the line as her own now. She doesn’t need to return to the place where it is written to remember it.

On the fourth day she books her trip to Lebanon.

She does it in the morning, in her hotel room, with the window open and the bells marking the hour. A flight from Granada to Madrid, Madrid to Beirut, departing in nine days. She has spoken to Najwa, her mother's cousin's daughter, twice now, on the phone, in the dialect Nadia has not spoken aloud in years, which comes back to her over the phone the way a thing returns to the body that the body never actually forgot. Najwa will meet her at the airport in Beirut. Najwa will drive her up to the Chouf. The road, Najwa

says, is open. The road is fine. "Come," Najwa had said. "The house is waiting. I have cleaned the room that was your grandmother's. Come and stay as long as you want."

She does not book a return from Beirut. She leaves it open, the way she left the return to Houston from Granada open, the way she is learning to leave things open.

She doesn't know whether she will find Rania. She hasn't tried to find her from a distance. She has decided she won't try to find her through searches and inquiries. That would be the wrong way to do it, and that would, in any case, leave traces she doesn't want to leave. She will go to the village. She will sit under the fig tree. She will ask Najwa, who knows everyone, whether anyone knows where the girl from the house down the lane has gone, the Muslim family, the daughter Rania, who would be a woman of thirty-eight now. And Najwa will know, or will know someone who knows, because that is how the village works, because that is how it has always worked, and either the road will lead to Rania or it will not. Nadia will drive down it either way.

That is the plan. It is firm now. She is going.

There is one thing left to do in Granada.

Nadia goes back to the Realejo on her last afternoon. She climbs the worn stone stairs to the third floor. Doña Pilar buzzes her in, is waiting at the open door, and isn't surprised to see her, because Nadia had called ahead and said there was one more thing she needed to do and asked if she might come for a short visit.

They sit on the balcony. The Alhambra tower is gold in the late afternoon, the way it had been the first day. Doña Pilar makes coffee. They talk for a while about Nadia's days in the city, about Lebanon, about the road that is open. Doña Pilar tells her to go, the way the mother told her to go, the way everyone who loves her is telling her to

go. “You have the face of a woman who has to go somewhere,” Doña Pilar says. “Go. The dead will keep. They are very patient.”

Then Nadia takes the drive out of her bag.

It is small, black, worn at the edges. She holds it in her hand for a moment. Doña Pilar looks at it, and looks at Nadia, and does not ask.

"Doña Pilar. I want to ask you for something."

"Ask."

"The box. The box he left me. The one with the papers. Is it still here."

"It is in the bottom drawer where it has always been. I put it back after you read it. I did not know if you would want it sent to you, or if you would come for it. It is yours. It is wherever you want it to be."

"I want to leave something in it."

Doña Pilar looks at her.

"This," Nadia says, holding up the drive. "It is a small thing. It holds notes. My own notes, from my work, from my months in Doha. They are about the same question he was asking. The question at the top of his papers. About the machines. About whether a human must be the last translator who is trusted. I have my own notes about that question. They are not finished either. I don’t know yet what to do with them. I don’t know whether to send them somewhere, or to keep them, or to destroy them. I’m not ready to decide. And I’m going to Lebanon. I don’t want to carry the decision with me, and I don’t want to carry the drive with me either, into a place where carrying it would be a risk to me and possibly to others."

She stops.

"I want to leave it in his box," she says. "With his papers. The unfinished thing of mine, with the unfinished thing of his. And when I come back from Lebanon, in a few weeks, or however long it takes, I will come and get it, and by then I think I will know what to do with it. I think the answer will have found me by then. But I don’t have it yet. And I can think of no safer place in the world to leave it than in his box, in your house, with his question on top of it."

Doña Pilar is quiet for a long moment.

Then she rises. She goes into the other room. She comes back carrying the box, the worn wooden box with *máquinas* on the lid. She sets it on the table between them. She opens it.

The papers are there, in the disorder Nadia had found them in and left them in. The loose sheets. The index cards. The question on top, underlined twice.

Nadia places the drive on top of the papers, on top of the question.

She looks at it there for a moment, the small black object resting on the pages carrying her teacher's hand.

Then Doña Pilar closes the lid.

"It will be here," Doña Pilar says. "It will be here in the bottom drawer, with his papers, until you come for it. No one touches that drawer. No one knows what is in it but me, and now you. It will wait. We are good at waiting in this house. We have had practice."

"Thank you, Doña Pilar."

"You will come back?"

"I will come back."

"For the box. And to see me?"

"For the box. And to see you."

"Good." Doña Pilar takes Nadia's hand across the table and holds it. "Then it is not a goodbye. It is only *hasta luego.* I prefer this. I have had enough goodbyes."

Hasta luego. Until later. The Spanish that does not close the door. Nadia thinks of the Arabic underneath it, the way her mentor had taught her to hear the Arabic underneath the Spanish, the centuries of it, *hatta,* until, the word that holds the door open across a thousand years.

"Hasta luego," Nadia says.

Nadia leaves the Realejo as the light is going.

She walks down through the old quarter, the narrow streets, the white walls, the doorways with their glimpses of tiled courtyards and the sound of water. She comes out onto the Carrera del Darro and walks along the river toward her hotel. The swifts are turning in the air above the gorge. The Alhambra is beginning to glow as the floodlights come up against the dusk.

She stops on the bridge, the one she has stopped on each evening.

She thinks about what she has done. She has left the drive in the box. She has not decided what to do with it. She has only decided where to leave the deciding. The decision is in Granada now, in a drawer, in a box, under a dead man's question, in the keeping of a woman who has had enough goodbyes. It will wait for her. She will come back to it as a different woman than she is tonight, a woman who has been to the village, who has sat under the fig tree, who has driven down the road, who has found Rania or has not. That woman will open the box and take out the drive and know what to do with it. Tonight's woman does not know. Tonight's woman has done the only honest thing, which is to leave the

unfinished thing with the other unfinished things, and to go forward on her journey.

She thinks about the mentor's card. *"I can only live as if it were true, and teach others to live so, and hope."*

She thinks about the question on top of the box, with her own small black drive resting on it now. "*Why must a human being be the last translator who is trusted?"*

She doesn't have the answer. He didn't have it either. Perhaps there is no answer. Perhaps there is only the wager, made in uncertainty, with one's whole life, the way he made it, the way she is making it now, leaving her notes in his box and going down a road toward a woman she may not recognize, in a country involved in a war that has only paused, because the alternative, the not-going, the not-wagering, the waiting for a certainty that is never going to come, is a worse way to be alive.

She looks up at the Alhambra, lit gold against the darkening sky, the walls her teacher spent his life among, the geometry built around an orientation, toward a particular direction, for a particular purpose, that the building continues to know even now, even after everything, even after all the dispensations have come and gone.

The room knows what it is for.

So, she thinks, standing on the bridge over the low summer river, does she.

In nine days she will fly to Beirut. Najwa will meet her. They will drive up into the Chouf, on the road that is open, toward the house that is waiting, toward the fig tree, toward whatever she will find or will not find.

Tonight she pauses on the bridge, in the city where her teacher is buried, the city where the man who would become her husband once

asked a question that the younger woman she then was, without thinking, said yes.

Then she walks the rest of the way down to her hotel.

She has a journey to make.

She is going to find out.

I want to thank the following Patreons who made it possible for this book to be placed directly into the public domain. Their support is what makes it possible for me to continue writing.

SILVER tier

Adam Sulkowski
Alexander
Andrew L.
Ben Hewett
Ben Miller
Brian Fox
Chris Garcia
Craig Brown
Damian Allis
Damjan Ilic
Dan
Dan Kettmann
Darrell Crick
Doug B
Droste
Ellen Fields
Eugene Ray
Gary Moore
Gion Marles
Hjalmer Duenow
Holton Gable
Houston Power
Ian Winn
Ildiko Thoth
Jacob Zaki
Jaime Beauchamp
Jake Holdrieth
Jason Anderson

GOLD tier

Javier
Jeremy Grossman
Jesse
Joe
joey horvitz
John Fisher
John Griffin
John Leporati
Justin Lohman
Karl
Kenya McCray
Kevin Thorbahn
Kris Brown
Kris Thomas
Lee Pinsky
Lee Svec
Lindsay Kent
Lucas Thomas
Luke
Mackenzie Medicinals
Mary Jo Smiley
Matthew MacLeod
Mercury McPherson
Mike Stirewalt
Mo Jabr
Neal Knitel
Nicole Torres
Niles Smith

Noah Latham
Oscar Henderson-Faranda
Patrick Spargur
Peter Robertson
Ragnar Joensen
Richard Kevin Feldman
Rio Hahn
Stanis Cristian
Steven
TheRealAntiher0
Tone Zone
U V
Willocybin
Windowpane
Yosef Asher

The following Honor Roll recognizes those whose generosity since 2018 has gone well beyond the ordinary, each having contributed more than five hundred dollars to sustain my work on the podcasts and with my writing. They are the reason the podcasts and this book are in the public domain.

HONOR ROLL

Ben Hewett
Bill Radacinski
Chris M
Dan
Dan Kettmann
Dan Montgomery
Daniel Covington
Darin Basile
Darrell Crick
David Asselstine
Doug B
Eugene Ray
Evan Freimuth
Gary Mack
Gary Moore
Houston Power
Ian Winn
Ildiko Thoth
Javier
John
John Griffin
Jon Hanna
Kevin thorbahn
Lee Svec
Luke
Mallie Clark
Marjean McKenna
Mari Anne
Mark Meers
Mary Jo Smiley
Melyssa Demma
Patrick John Ennis
Patrick Spargur
Perception of David

RICHARD G ROBINSON
Rio Hahn
Robert B
Sal K Kirneh
Shane McDonald
The Accidental Mystic
Tone Zone
Valeo schultz
Warren (AZ)
Yosef Asher